Rural electives: Providing transformative learning opportunities and influencing choice of career: The Stellenbosch University experience

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Background. Rural background and longitudinal rural clerkships for medical students including training at rural medical schools are established predictors for rural practice. Considering that less than a third of all South African medical students originate from rural areas and are educated at urban universities, additional strategies are necessary to encourage rural career choices.

Objective. This study explores the benefits of a 1-month rural elective in influencing further rural practice and is funded by the Stellenbosch University Rural Medical Education Partnership Initiative.

Method. This qualitative study evaluated rural elective students’ learning experiences and possible influences on future career choice. Online anonymised surveys and feedback from focus group discussions were analysed to identify recurring themes.

Results. Students described the rural elective as an enriching experience and a positive opportunity facilitating exposure to the context in which they will ultimately work. Adapting to environments with limited resources and populations with varying cultural backgrounds were embraced and valued by students. In addition, learning opportunities for community engagement and patient-centred care were seen to inspire students to return to rural areas.

Conclusion. Rural electives provide transformative learning experiences that could influence urban-educated medical students’ choice of working in rural areas. Further investigation of this model is recommended. Innovative medical education models offering shorter periods of rural exposure may serve to enhance rural recruitment in South Africa.