

**This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2004. Minor changes may have been made to the published piece.**

### **Media Bites: Get the drift?**

Twenty-one years ago, I spent six months on a student exchange at the University of Illinois, a sprawling campus smack in the rural midwest of the US. There I remember learning about the clash of cultures and expectations that was occurring as people moved from US cities to the country in search of a richer and more affordable lifestyle.

Apparently, the old-timers didn't always have much time for the newcomers, and vice versa.

Our rural sociology lecturer was an affable chap and I enjoyed his subject, but it never seemed particularly relevant to Australia, with our different geography and demography. Besides, I had grown up in the sticks and all I wanted at that stage was to hit the big city lights.

But a recent drive along the southern NSW coast brought back some of those old lessons. It also had me spluttering with shock at the transformation that had occurred in the few years since my last visit.

Where once were rolling green hills was now row upon row of brick and tile. Where once were advertisements for affordable holiday shacks were prices to make even a Sydneysider gasp.

There are similar stories from all over, of city swallowing up the coast and her hinterland, according to Australian Bureau of Statistics data. From Busselton in WA to Hervey Bay in Queensland and Victor Harbour in SA, the move is on.

The glossy mags tend to glorify the sea change as the choice of harried professionals searching a more fulfilling, creative way of life. The reality for many may be less glamorous - it may be just as much about the search for affordable housing and the need to stretch retirement dollars.

“If older people move to the coast in the future at the same rate as they have done in the past, as the baby boomers get into those ages, there will be huge movements to the coast with huge implications for

services,” says Peter McDonald, professor of demography at the Australian National University.

“My guess is we will also see movement inland, as has already happened with the Gold Coast hinterland.”

Apart from the squeeze on infrastructure and services, Professor McDonald says his group’s projections also suggest the labour force generally will be insufficient to service ageing coastal populations.

None of this will come as any surprise to doctors already struggling to meet health demands in such areas. The seasonal influx of “grey nomads” in the north of WA already creates pressures for local health services, according to Associate Professor Ann Larson, a demographer who heads the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health in Geraldton.

But the impact of such tourists is likely to be minimal compared to those migrating permanently to coast and country, who are likely to bring big city expectations along with them.

As ever, one person’s half empty glass is another’s drop well enjoyed. What looks like an emerging conundrum for health service and workforce planners (add it to the list, I hear you say) might be good news for health professionals pining for a sea change job.

For my own selfish reasons, I hope there are lots of you. I plan to join the urban refugees and return to my country roots, and am hoping that health services will be more accessible there than when I was a kid.