WAGPET commissioned the 2007 Maintaining an Effective Procedural Workforce in WA HealthFix report when the Engaging Rural Doctors research identified a critical and worsening shortage of rural GPs with skills in anaesthetics, surgery, obstetrics and emergency medicine. As a result, the director-general of WA Health set up a Rural Practice Pathway (RPP). WAGPET coordinates the RPP currently.

In 2016 HealthFix Consulting reprised Maintaining an Effective Procedural Workforce in WA with a view to understanding how this active rural practice pathway had impacted the numbers and distribution of rural procedural doctors. Fortunately, the various organisational databases from both 2007and 2016 were the same, and the same permission was granted to access them; so the value of comparison over time was compelling.

The results showed that numbers of rural proceduralists in WA had increased by 25%, a most pleasing finding. However, the increase was all in the area of non-GP rural proceduralists. GP proceduralist numbers had remained stable, although more GP proceduralists were GP registrars in 2016 than in 2007.

The increase in and distribution of non-GP proceduralists was not entirely consistent with a commitment to a shared care model. Nor was it consistent throughout WA, with some areas more likely to have non-GP proceduralists than GP proceduralists. The reasons are complex and the subject of much debate at present.

This paper elaborates the findings but also the action taken by WA Country Health Service to assume overall responsibility and accountability for the recruitment, selection, training and career planning for the WA rural procedural workforce supported by an interagency reference board made up of WAGPET, Rural Health West, the Rural Clinical School of WA and WA Country Health Services’ CEOs.