

## MEDIA RELEASE

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### Inspirational rural doctors' stories to be shared at RDAQ2024



When Dr Caitlin Rutherford-Heard was born with a rare vascular disorder called Klippel-Trenaunay Syndrome (KTS), the obstetrician told her terrified mum that Caitlin could still grow up to be anything she wanted to be.

Turns out she wanted to be just like that doctor... but it wouldn't be an easy path.

Caitlin's is just one of the inspiring stories that will be featured at the 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Rural Doctors Association of Queensland (RDAQ) conference being held at the Brisbane Convention & Exhibition Centre (BCEC) later this week.

"My journey to become a rural doctor started earlier than most, I spent a lot of my childhood in the hospital system," Dr Rutherford-Heard said.

"I was born with a large hemangioma to my left chest and severe progressive pectus excavatum which means I have two centimetres between my sternum and my spine now.

"I've had the privilege of being cared for by many incredible doctors however, I've also had some very negative experiences, the types of things we learn not to do in medical school.

"I have been told to maybe stop trying to strive as high as normal people can strive because...I'm not normal. But luckily, my mum kept me safe but also told me to reach for the stars – just like our obstetrician said."

Caitlin had 24 surgeries by the time she was 24 including a mastectomy at 11 months of age and two cardio thoracic surgeries as a teenager – one causing a near fatal cardiac arrhythmia.

Despite her challenges she went on to study nursing and midwifery, then medicine, and is now currently a Queensland Rural Generalist Pathway Intern at Townsville University Hospital.

“I always thought I would be a big city obstetrician and gynaecologist but after training in a rural setting as a student, meeting the rural generalists at Beaudesert and Roma hospitals and attending my first RDAQ conference I just knew these were my people,” Caitlin said.

“They loved medicine, but more importantly, they loved the human element, the ‘art’ of medicine.

“I realise now that I wanted to become a doctor to help create change in the medical world. Living through this has not been easy, but now, I believe my disability and my experiences are one of my superpowers as a doctor,” she said.

“Patients see my scars and see my compression garments and they seem to immediately open up to me more, I think it humanises our conversation.

“It also allows me to have a level of empathy you cannot learn other than through lived experience. Every day it acts as a reminder to listen to exactly what the patient is telling me.”

RDAQ President Dr Alex Dunn said it was stories like Caitlin’s that helped demonstrate what it means to be a rural doctor in Queensland.

“We have all taken unique journeys as rural doctors and, like our 35-year history at RDAQ, there have often been ups and downs along the way,” RDAQ President Dr Alex Dunn.

“Every year we come together at our annual conference as more than colleagues, we are a rural medicine family.

“We use this time to reconnect, re-energise and learn with and from each other, and sharing our individual stories is an important part of that.”

RDAQ2024 is being held 20 – 22 June 2024 at BCEC.

**More information:**

[View program  
conference.rdaq.com.au](https://conference.rdaq.com.au)

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