

MEDIA RELEASE



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Plight of rural specialist shows registration process needs rethink

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) says the case of a German born orthopaedic surgeon—who provides much-needed care in an area of need in rural NSW, but will soon be deregistered if he doesn't undertake training in fields of medicine he will never use—demonstrates why a more flexible model for assessing specialist overseas trained doctors (OTDs) is urgently required.

RDAA is calling for a model that enables specialist OTDs to be assessed on the scope of practice of individual practitioners, rather than requiring them to be credentialed in areas of medicine they don't utilise.

RDAA has written to the Federal Health Minister, Nicola Roxon, and the House Standing Committee on Health and Ageing's Inquiry into the Registration Processes and Support for Overseas Trained Doctors, to outline its concerns.

"Local and even regional availability of medical specialists can significantly improve the health outcomes of rural and remote Australians, helping to avoid long delays in diagnosis and treatment. It also alleviates the financial and emotional hardship associated with the need to travel long distances for these services" RDAA President, Dr Paul Mara, said.

"Unfortunately, however, rural communities have a relatively low number of specialists per head of population.

"RDAA completely agrees that where specialist OTDs seek to work in Australia, registration processes must be able to objectively assess whether they meet the same rigorous standards applied to Australian-trained specialists.

"However, where these doctors are already practising in Australia in an area of need, these processes should be practical and relevant to their current scope of practice...and they should be capable of determining whether these specialists are already meeting the health needs of their patients in a safe and clinically appropriate manner."

Dr Christoph Ahrens has practised as an orthopaedic surgeon in Bega, a designated area of medical workforce need, for almost six years. Yet he is currently at risk of being deregistered within the next six weeks under the new registration process for OTDs because he has not yet undertaken his Australian surgical fellowship.

"This would necessitate him leaving Bega for at least 12 months to undertake the fellowship, many parts of which are not relevant to his current practice" Dr Mara said. "For example, it covers subspecialties such as spinal surgery and paediatric surgery which would be inappropriate for an orthopaedic surgeon to perform at a small rural hospital that does not have the necessary supports for such surgery.

"Dr Ahren's concerns, and his desire to remain practising in Bega, have been supported by the Bega Medical Staff Council and the local community.

"We are not necessarily arguing that Dr Ahrens should be given registration without undergoing assessment. But his case highlights the fact that specialist OTD registration needs more flexibility, because in cases like this there is a real chance that a rural community crying out for local specialist care is going to be denied it for no good reason.

"This is a very worrying situation that we would ask Minister Roxon to urgently act on, as it has potential to impact on the availability of specialist care across regional, rural and remote Australia."

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