

MEDIA RELEASE



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Ticks for mental health and hospital funding, but urgent work needed on rural doctor shortage

Significant day-to-day frustrations of rural doctors in accessing adequate mental health services for their patients could be eased following the announcement in tonight's federal budget of additional mental health funding.

Another potential win for rural patients is the additional funding for regional hospital and health service infrastructure, which should assist rural doctors in various locations to get patients with acute and chronic conditions into regional hospitals in shorter timeframes.

"Rural doctors across Australia are intimately involved in their communities—they share the frustrations of patients with mental illness, and their families, about the lack of access to available mental health care services and limited opportunities for ongoing management of these chronic conditions" President of the Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA), Dr Paul Mara, said.

"Rural doctors and their patients need better support to ensure that ongoing mental health management, and not solely crisis management, is available around the clock, both in rural practice and hospital settings, in collaboration with other mental health professionals. It is also important that some of this funding goes into preventative mental health initiatives—and the education and training of doctors, nurses and other health professionals in mental health skills—at the local level.

"We question, however, whether the Government's reliance on rolling out a substantial amount of this additional funding under the yet to be established Medicare Locals will result in the optimum outcomes.

"The injection of additional infrastructure funding into regional hospitals and health services is also appropriate, given that many regional and smaller hospitals across Australia require urgent upgrades. High quality and adequately staffed regional hospitals are essential in providing support for doctors working in smaller rural communities. Improving hospital and health service facilities in regional centres will improve access to hospital care for patients in surrounding smaller communities, and will help to attract to regional centres more highly qualified specialists who in many circumstances then provide outreach services to the smaller communities.

"With the growing expectation on rural practices and doctors to provide rural clinical training places to more medical students and young doctors, there is also a need to further assist these smaller practices to expand their infrastructure.

"Most existing rural doctors are rapidly approaching retirement age, and there is still enormous difficulty in attracting young doctors into rural practice to take their place. We must urgently address this issue of workforce if rural and remote communities are to have sustainable and viable rural health services into the future.

"To this end, we welcome the announcement of a new regional health agency. We have felt for many years that there has been inadequate representation of rural issues within successive governments and departments.

"For example, we continue to be dismayed at the significant anomalies within the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (Remoteness Areas) system, and proposed changes to after-hours care arrangements, both of which only make it harder to attract doctors to small rural communities.

"We look forward to working constructively with the regional health agency and Federal Health Minister Nicola Roxon to implement sound policy initiatives that attract, recruit and retain much-needed doctors and other health professionals into rural and remote communities as soon as possible."

Available for interview: RDAA President, Dr Paul Mara.
Media contact: Patrick Daley on 0408 004 890.