

MEDIA RELEASE

Tuesday 5 April 2011



Rural doctors welcome Government rollout of additional rural training places

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) has welcomed the Federal Government's rollout of additional doctor training places in country locations, saying the extra places could help alleviate the critical shortage of doctors in rural towns provided improved supports and incentives are introduced to entice doctors to remain in the bush on completion of their training.

Over the past few weeks, Federal Health Minister, Nicola Roxon, has announced the rollout of 331 additional training places across Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia, in both urban and rural settings.

The additional places (funding for which had been previously announced by the Government) are part of the Gillard Government's Australian General Practice Training program that, by 2014, will support 1200 annual GP training places nationally, up from 600 in 2007. Importantly, 45% of these places will be located in regional Australia.

RDAA President, Dr Paul Mara—who has been a doctor in the rural NSW town of Gundagai for nearly 30 years—said the Government was to be commended for taking action to deliver more doctors across Australia.

“Our health system relies heavily on doctors to provide frontline care” Dr Mara said. “This is particularly so in the bush, where these doctors provide cradle-to-grave primary care to their communities, as well as emergency, after-hours and hospital-based care (such as anaesthetics, general surgery and obstetrics) in many locations.

“Numerous studies have shown that rural Australians have significantly poorer health outcomes than those living in urban areas—the shortage of doctors and other health professionals in the bush is a root cause of this, so any initiatives to build the rural doctor workforce are welcome.”

A recent RDAA survey showed that more than 52% of rural Australians are waiting one or more weeks for a routine appointment with a GP—of these, 18% are waiting more than three weeks, and some up to six months. The survey also revealed that, in the past year, 66% of rural Australians had to travel away from their local area for non-emergency medical treatment, and many are being forced to attend Accident and Emergency units at distant hospitals for basic consults.

“Given these figures, the Government's rollout of these additional doctor training places could literally be a lifeline for many rural communities” Dr Mara said. “This will particularly be the case if the additional training places are followed by appropriate incentives, infrastructure and supports that entice more of these doctors to take up rural practice once their training is complete.

“Given that positive training experiences in rural settings are one of the most effective measures for attracting doctors to country towns, it is essential that this new cohort of doctors is provided with meaningful and quality training placements in rural medical practices.

“The experienced country doctors who provide this training to medical students and junior doctors, while also carrying out their day-to-day clinical workload, also need better support to assist them in meeting the substantial amount of time and infrastructure required to provide this training effectively.

“We hope that this first welcome step by the Government in increasing doctor training places will eventually become just one part of an integrated strategy to entice more doctors to the bush.”

Available for interview: Dr Paul Mara on 0466 665 933.
Alternative media contact: Patrick Daley on 0408 004 890.