

# MEDIA RELEASE



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## Review of troubled system confirms problems...but lacks solutions

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) says a review of the troubled Australian Standard Geographic Classification - Remoteness Areas (ASGC-RA) system confirms there are significant geographic anomalies in the system, but ignores main areas of concern about how these anomalies are negatively impacting on rural health services.

RDAA is also significantly concerned at claims by the Federal Health Minister, Nicola Roxon, that the review found that overall the ASGC-RA system is 'working well'.

"This technical review by the National Centre for Social Applications of Geographic Information Systems (GISCA) has recognised what RDAA has been trying to tell the Government for many months—that there are serious discrepancies in the way the ASGC-RA is classifying many small rural towns" RDAA President, Dr Paul Mara, said.

"In RDAA's view, this is making it much more difficult for these towns to recruit much-needed doctors.

"Significant amendments to the ASGC-RA are required, and we continue to call for an independent review of the system. Praising the ASGC-RA as a means of enhancing the recruitment and retention of rural doctors is like trying to drive a nail with a fork. It is the wrong tool for the job and it is costing millions of dollars going to the wrong areas.

"In its review, GISCA has only proposed a couple of small 'patches' to try to get the system to work better, but these are nothing more than tinkering around the edges and will not solve the big problems with the ASGC-RA.

"The major problem is that, because many small rural towns are now classified the same as major regional cities and even Hobart—meaning doctors receive the same relocation and retention payments regardless of whether they choose to practise in the small towns or the large cities—many are opting for the large cities with their major tertiary hospitals, specialist support, little if any after-hours work, and substantial educational and cultural facilities.

"Unless major changes are made to increase the classification differential between these towns and cities, the small towns will continue to lose out to the major regional cities and Hobart in attracting much-needed doctors.

"We are very disappointed at Minister Roxon's assertion that the Federal Government has delivered a record number of doctors to regional Australia—particularly given this assertion is based in part on locations classified as being ASGC-RA 2 (Inner Regional) areas. This means the figures are almost definitely just reflecting any increase in doctors to the major regional cities and even Hobart!

"We could give Minister Roxon hundreds of examples of small rural towns across Australia that are crying out for doctors. It is somewhat ironic that at the same time Minister Roxon is talking of a 'record number of doctors to regional Australia', a doctor shortage in the town of Leeton in southern NSW meant no doctors were on-call for the whole of last weekend. And it's not only Leeton—this is now a serious problem across country Australia.

"Successive governments, including the Rudd and Gillard Governments, have undertaken positive work in trying to boost rural doctor numbers, including by expanding rural and regional training opportunities for medical students and registrars and expanding the very successful Prevocational General Practice Placements Program.

"Why is the Government ruining this good work by persisting with a twisted system like the ASGC-RA that doesn't even recognise differences in health service locations and is short-changing so many small rural towns of doctors?"

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