

MEDIA RELEASE



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Immediate review needed: Rural towns now losing doctors under flawed classification system

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) is urging the Federal Government to undertake an immediate and independent review of the Australian Standard Geographical Classification – Remoteness Areas (ASGC-RA) system, warning that doctors are now leaving smaller rural towns affected by the system's anomalies for larger centres.

RDAA's call follows a recent Senate Estimates hearing at which the Secretary of the Australian Department of Health and Ageing, Jane Halton, downplayed concerns with the system and indicated it would not be reviewed for at least 18 months to two years after its commencement last July.

The ASGC-RA is used to determine the extent of relocation and retention incentives that a doctor receives, based on the location in which they are practising. It has placed many smaller rural towns in the same classification category as larger regional centres and even Hobart, meaning doctors now receive the same incentive payments whether they practise in the smaller towns or larger centres. In other cases, smaller towns are now just separated from larger centres by one classification level where previously there was a separation of two or three levels.

"Given the additional supports that the larger centres provide both for doctors (*ie.* specialist support, tertiary hospital support, and often no after-hours responsibilities) and their families (*ie.* more education options, more cultural options, and more employment choice for spouses), we need to have a system in place that provides real incentives for doctors to live and work in our smaller communities" RDAA Vice President, Dr Peter Rischbieth, said.

"RDAA is receiving significant and growing feedback from rural practices in small towns across Australia that they are now losing doctors and registrars to larger regional centres—and also having trouble attracting new doctors—following the ASGC-RA's introduction last July.

"The change in the classification system has also made it less attractive for overseas trained doctors (OTDs) to work in smaller towns. For example, under the previous classification system (RRMA), OTDs had to work 4 years in some smaller towns, or 10 years in larger centres, before they could access an unrestricted provider number. Under the ASGC-RA system, OTDs now have to work 6 years in the smaller towns and 7 years in the larger centres, making the larger centres a more attractive option.

"Practices in many small towns were already finding it hard retaining and attracting doctors...putting these towns on the same playing field as larger regional centres (some of which are in prime coastal locations) is now making it virtually impossible.

"We cannot afford to wait for 18 months or two years to have ticked by before this flawed classification system is reviewed. You don't need to be Einstein to see that if you offer the same incentives to larger centres as you do for smaller towns, doctors will gravitate towards the larger centres.

"We urge the Federal Government to establish an immediate and independent review of the ASGC-RA system, before the horse has bolted right out of rural Australia."

Various RDAA representatives are available for interview.

Media contacts: Patrick Daley on 0408 004 890 (Wednesday).
Ineke Kuiper on 0408 669 638 (Thursday and Friday).