

MEDIA RELEASE



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New agency welcome, but must ‘show teeth’

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) has welcomed the establishment of the Federal Government’s new rural health agency, Rural and Regional Health Australia, saying it is recognition of the need to improve access to healthcare for country Australians.

But it has warned that the agency must be prepared to ‘show its teeth’ in fighting for additional rural health funding within the Government and bureaucracy.

RDAA has also urged the agency to adopt a formal regime of ‘rural proofing’, under which existing and proposed federal health policies would be carefully assessed to ensure they are not adversely impacting on local healthcare models that are already working well in rural communities.

“We welcome recognition by the Federal Government that rural health and rural medicine is different from that in urban Australia, and that the rural health sector needs a dedicated agency to represent its interests in the federal bureaucracy” RDAA President, Dr Paul Mara, said.

“It is also pleasing to see the new agency expanding its reach to become a cross-agency portfolio—this provides significant potential to better co-ordinate the delivery of rural health measures and initiatives across the whole of Government.

“But it is critical that this agency has bite. It needs to be a strong, independent advocate for rural health, it needs to go into the ring fighting for better funding for rural health services, and it needs to have real influence within the policy-making activities of the federal health department and the wider bureaucracy.

“In short, it needs to be given teeth and it must not be afraid to use them.

“It also needs to be able to provide sound, well-researched and informed advice, gathered not simply from within the bureaucracy and its consultants but from the associations representing those health professionals working at the coal-face of rural healthcare.

“And it must be a vocal campaigner for the ‘rural proofing’ of health policy within Government and the bureaucracy.

“As just one example, the negative impact that the shambolic Australian Standard Geographical Classification – Remoteness Areas (ASGC-RA) system has had on many small rural towns across Australia could perhaps have been avoided if there had been any serious attempt at ‘rural proofing’ the policy before it was implemented.

“We thank the Federal Government, and independents Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor, for their efforts in establishing Rural and Regional Health Australia, and look forward to working with the new agency to improve access to local health services across country Australia.”

Rural and Regional Health Australia’s website (www.ruralhealthaustralia.gov.au) provides a useful portal for rural patients and their families, as well as rural health professionals, in accessing information about rural health programs and initiatives funded by the Federal Government. The agency is also contactable via an information line (1800 899 538) and email (infoRRHA@ruralhealthaustralia.gov.au).

Available for interview: RDAA CEO, Jenny Johnson, on 0429 931 120.

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