

MEDIA RELEASE



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Rural communities could benefit from online medical consultations... but they won't replace your local doctor

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) has expressed its support for the introduction of rebates for online specialist consultations, but stressed that they should not be viewed as a substitute for providing doctors and health professionals 'on the ground' in rural and remote communities.

In its submission in response to the discussion paper: *Connecting Health Services with the Future: Modernising Medicare by Providing Rebates for Online Consultations*, the RDAA has said that, if managed appropriately, telehealth consultations could improve the delivery of some health care services to rural and remote Australians.

"Many patients in rural areas are faced with long and expensive journeys to see a specialist and in many cases online consultations could result in significant time and cost savings for patients," said Dr Peter Rischbieth, RDAA Vice President.

"Examples of the type of consultation we see as appropriate include follow-up appointments with specialists where, for example, test results are discussed and no physical examination of the patient is required, or the monitoring of patients with chronic illnesses."

However, Dr Rischbieth is adamant that these initiatives must support, rather than replace, face-to-face consultations.

"Rural GPs are the lifeblood of thousands of rural communities. They are a unique group of highly skilled doctors, many with advanced skills training and who provide procedural services across a range of disciplines.

"People living in rural and remote areas rely on the availability of these highly skilled GPs to help avoid delays in diagnosis and treatment, and the financial and emotional hardships associated with the need to travel long distances for diagnosis and treatment.

"We would strongly oppose the use of online consultations as a workforce strategy that replaces the need to recruit and retain doctors to deliver services on the ground in rural and remote areas."

In its submission, the RDAA also stressed that GPs and specialists practising in rural areas must be strongly supported and should not be disadvantaged by the introduction of MBS item numbers for on-line consultations.

"GPs in rural practices generally also provide essential after-hours, emergency and secondary care in rural and remote communities," Dr Rischbieth said.

"We need to support these doctors and make sure any rebates and incentives recognise the importance of the services they provide."

Available for interview:	Dr Peter Rischbieth	0408 813 143
	Jenny Johnson (RDAA CEO)	0429 931 120
Alternative media contacts:	Patrick Daley (Monday to Wednesday)	0408 004 890
	Ineke Kuiper (Thursday and Friday)	0408 669 638