



Media release
Tuesday 2 August 2011

Evidence mounts: Doctors launch 'Stop the Rot!' roadshow to push for urgent review of faulty system

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) has launched a national 'Stop the Rot!' virtual roadshow to highlight mounting evidence that the new Australian Standard Geographical Classification – Remoteness Areas (ASGC-RA) system is making it significantly more difficult for small rural towns to attract doctors.

Over coming weeks, the online roadshow will feature rural towns across Australia that are being significantly disadvantaged by the ASGC-RA. RDAA President, Dr Paul Mara, also intends to take the roadshow literally 'on the road' in the coming months, to visit many affected towns across Australia.

RDAA continues to call for an immediate and independent review of the system.

The ASGC-RA is used to determine the extent of relocation and retention incentives that doctors receive based on their location. However, it places many smaller rural towns in the same category as larger regional centres and even Hobart, meaning doctors can receive the same incentive payments whether they practise in the smaller towns or larger centres. This substantially reduces the incentive for doctors to move to or stay in the smaller towns.

"The irony is that, in many towns, more remote classification levels apply less than 2 kilometres—and even just 5 metres—from the town limits. If 5 metres out of town is considered 'very remote' then why is the town itself not considered 'very remote' too?" Dr Mara said.

"We are particularly disappointed that the Australian Department of Health and Ageing has ruled out a review of the system for at least 18 months to two years after its commencement (in July 2010). We fervently hope that the Federal Health Minister, Nicola Roxon, will over-rule this.

"To take one example, we challenge Minister Roxon and her Departmental Secretary, Jane Halton, to drive the nearly 800km from the major centre of Townsville to the remote town of Cloncurry—locations now separated by just one classification level—and then tell us that Townsville is 'rural' and Cloncurry is only slightly more so.

"We have had an enormous response from our members on the ASGC-RA issue, and rural councils are now also expressing their concern at the impact the system will have on their towns.

"We need the Government to call an urgent and independent review into this crazy system. To wait at least another six months is like watching a patient bleed out and not doing anything...eventually that patient will die.

"The Government knows rural practices are now finding it harder to recruit much-needed doctors...surely it is better to review the situation now rather than wait until the patient is beyond treatment?"

The 'Stop the Rot' roadshow will feature case studies of affected rural towns each week at www.rdaa.com.au. See RDAA's first case study for its 'Stop the Rot' roadshow next page.

Various RDAA representatives are available for interview.

Media contacts: Patrick Daley on 0408 004 890 (Mons to Weds) and Ineke Kuiper on 0408 669 638 (Thurs/Fri).



Case study 1

North Queensland towns miss out under ASGC-RA system

Under the ASGC-RA classification system, many small rural towns across North Queensland now have the same classification level as the major regional centres of Townsville and Cairns (RA3, outer regional). This is despite the fact that Townsville and Cairns each have between 150,000 and 200,000 people, major hospitals, considerable specialist support, much lower on-call requirements for local doctors, and a wide range of educational and leisure facilities. The smaller towns are now directly competing with Townsville and Cairns for doctors, as the relocation and retention payments available are exactly the same. Queensland's small rural towns already faced uphill battles recruiting enough doctors to service their populations...now things have got worse. Here are just a few examples:

Town: Ingham

ASGC-RA classification: RA3 (outer regional) — same as Townsville and Cairns

Approximately 4km out of town the classification changes to RA4 (remote)

Now competing against Townsville and Cairns for doctors

Ingham is a small town of 5,000 people. It is located 110km north of Townsville and 220km south of Cairns, and has a shire population of approximately 13,500. The local doctors in Ingham provide on-call after-hours care to patients on a 1-in-3 to 1-in-5 roster (including public holidays), and inpatient care and emergency care at the local hospital. Competing with Townsville and Cairns for doctors is now even more difficult for Ingham.

Town: Tully

ASGC-RA classification: RA3 (outer regional) — same as Townsville and Cairns

Less than 2km out of town the classification changes to RA4 (remote)

Confirmed district of workforce shortage

Now competing against Townsville and Cairns for doctors

Tully is a small town of 2,500 people. It is located 180km south of Cairns and 210km north of Townsville. There is a small public hospital at Tully servicing an area population of approximately 10,000 people. Tully was previously a four-practice town. Now there is one practice. Tully lost two doctors recently (one full-time and one part-time), leaving 2.4 doctors to care for the area's population. When Cyclone Yasi struck the region earlier this year, Tully was at the centre of the devastation. The Category 5 cyclone has increased the demand and workload for doctors, which is in stark contrast to the shrinking number of doctors in the area.

Town: Cloncurry

ASGC-RA classification: RA4 (remote) — just one classification level different from Townsville and Cairns

Approximately 1km out of town the classification changes to RA5 (very remote)

Confirmed district of workforce shortage

Now competing against Townsville and Cairns for doctors.

Cloncurry is located 770km west of Townsville with a population of 2,400 people. The classification differential between Cloncurry (RA4) and Townsville and Cairns (both RA3) has been reduced under the ASGC-RA system to just one level of difference. This is making it extremely difficult for Cloncurry to attract and retain doctors, as doctors can instead work in Cairns and Townsville—and have a better lifestyle with minimal or no on-call responsibilities and access to more services—while receiving incentives that are only marginally less than Cloncurry. Flinders Medical Centre has reported that one of its Overseas Trained Doctors has already decided to relocate to Cairns.