

# MEDIA RELEASE



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## Rural doctors click 'welcome' button on telehealth measure

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) has welcomed today's launch of the Federal Government's Medicare-funded telehealth initiative, saying it has "real potential" to improve access to specialists for rural and remote Australians.

The measure, to commence this Friday, will allow patients in rural, regional and outer metropolitan areas to 'attend' consultations with distant specialists via video-conferencing from the convenience of their local GP clinic or other local healthcare facilities.

Participating health practitioners will receive Medicare rebates to compensate them for their time invested in the consultation, and some support for implementing the technology required. Payments will be applicable for the specialist and GP at each end of the video-conference, and the nurse, midwife or Aboriginal health worker assisting the patient during the consultation. The Medicare-funded telehealth services will also be available to residents of eligible aged care facilities and to patients at Aboriginal Medical Services anywhere in Australia.

"Currently many rural patients are forced to travel hundreds and even thousands of kilometres for specialist consultations, given the significant shortage of specialists in rural and regional Australia" RDAA Vice President, Dr Peter Rischbieth, said.

"These patients face significant travel and accommodation costs, and long periods of time away from work, in getting to and from these consultations which can be required at regular intervals for many conditions.

"While face-to-face consultations with specialists will always be necessary in many cases, in many other cases a consult with a distant specialist can be just as comprehensive if held via video-conference from the convenience of the patient's local GP clinic or healthcare facility, with the local GP in attendance to provide medical advice at the patient's end.

"While this initiative won't help ease the continuing shortage of GPs in rural and remote Australia, and should never be seen as a replacement for on-the-ground doctors, it will be an excellent additional service for many rural patients and the local doctors who treat them.

"The Federal Government is to be congratulated on getting this important initiative up and running.

"We will continue to work with the Government to ensure the appropriate support mechanisms are available to local rural doctors to assist them to provide this service to their patients, and to ensure the new initiative does not disadvantage those GPs and specialists already providing on-the-ground medical care in rural and remote towns."

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**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).