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Major commitment to rural healthcare needed in lead-up to Tas election

The Rural Doctors Association of Tasmania (RDAT) is calling for significant funding and support for the state's rural healthcare system to be announced in advance of the State election.

RDAT President, Dr Ben Dodds, said that rural health services were struggling with ongoing workforce shortages and hospital downgrades.

“We desperately need investment in building the Rural Generalist, GP, and nursing and allied health workforce in rural areas, as well as significant investment in rural hospitals and other rural health infrastructure” **RDAT President, Dr Ben Dodds, said.**

“We continue to lose doctors and other health professionals to the other states which offer better conditions and facilities, and essential health facilities across rural and remote Tasmania continue to close. We urgently need to reverse this trend through innovative health workforce initiatives and proper funding.”

Dr Dodds said key rural health priorities for Tasmania's major parties should include:

- Negotiation of the expired Rural Medical Practitioners agreement to reflect the value and role of rural doctors
- Investment into resourcing district hospitals with the equipment required in contemporary healthcare settings (eg. point of care ultrasound, live virtual care connections, electronic medical records.)
- A commitment to transitioning the North West (NW) hospitals to include Rural Generalist doctors as part of their core staffing model for specialties like Obstetrics, Anaesthetics and Emergency. NW hospitals have chronic staffing shortages for maternity and long wait lists for low-risk procedures like colonoscopies and endoscopies
- Continued investment into the Mersey Rural Workforce Centre and GP recruitment models such as the Single Employer Model.

Dr Dodds urged the major parties to think sensibly, not just politically, when making announcements of significant funding that could be better spent elsewhere in the health system.

“While we welcome the State's investment into the GP NOW Rapid Response Team commitment, which would employ more GPs in the Tasmanian Health Service, it may come too late for rural communities. Better solutions are needed to address the issues affecting general practice, particularly in rural areas, before more practices shut down due to viability issues, leaving patients without access to primary care,” Dr Dodds said.

“We would much prefer to see money spent on measures that will help improve the recruitment and retention of GPs into rural Tasmania, such as providing quality accommodation or other resources that are targeted to rural needs. While a very small amount of money has been set aside in Forward Budget Estimates for the District Hospitals master planning, it will require much more significant investment to modernise these facilities.”

RDAT does not support the Liberals’ proposed ban on ambulance ramping at Tasmanian hospitals.

“Ambulance ramping is a direct result of inadequate funding of the hospital system, the health workforce and general practice in Tasmania.

“Banning ramping simply hides the problem, when what we need is a solution; more investment into community based care, shorter waiting lists for hospital specialist consultation and improved access to medical imaging within the community,” Dr Dodds said.

“Simply offloading a patient into an overcrowded Emergency Department without the supervision of an experienced clinician will result in patient harm.”

RDAT supports Labor Party proposal to expand the use of Nurse Practitioners (NPs) in rural and remote areas, provided Labor consulted closely with rural health stakeholders on how the model would work on-the-ground.

“We cautiously support the idea, particularly given it could potentially help to alleviate some of the workforce pressure being faced by rural GPs, but we need to see the finer details.

“While we support the provision of more paramedics in rural and remote communities, there needs to be a much clearer commitment to supporting general practice services in the same communities. GPs keep people out of hospital and away from needing emergency ambulances.

“We welcome Labor’s commitment to expand the Rural Medical Workforce Centre, which is designed to support the training, recruitment and retention of doctors and health professionals in north-west Tasmania and beyond.

“We also support both major parties’ commitment to rule out payroll tax for general practices in the state, given the devastating impact this would have on many rural practices that are already struggling under a heavy financial and administrative burden.

RDAT does not support Labor’s commitment to provide free health checks in community health centres.

“Health checks should be provided through local rural general practices, and this funding could be used to increase nursing capacity within existing practices to provide these checks.

“We welcome Labor’s \$60 million hospital upgrade fund for Tasmania’s regional health facilities, as long as it is directed to the areas that need it the most. This should be guided by the clinicians providing the care and not dictated by the Department of Health.

RDAT welcome the Green’s proposal to extend virtual care and video conferencing to rural hospitals and on-site radiology and pathology services in Launceston.

“Virtual care can provide excellent support to clinicians in rural and remote areas however it does not replace in-person care. Access to timely critical care and specialist advice in an emergency helps sustain our rural workforce by giving them assurances they are not working alone.

“The Greens’ commitment to expand on-site radiology and pathology services at Launceston General Hospital to have 24/7 coverage would be an excellent investment and would significantly assist health services in Northern Tasmania.

“We call on all parties and candidates to step up for rural Tasmanians who deserve to be able to access quality care, close to home. Rural health services, particularly rural general practice, needs targeted investment to be able to provide the level of care needed by rural communities.”

[Click here for a high resolution photo of Dr Ben Dodds](#)

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