

MEDIA RELEASE



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PM warned: hospital reform will fail in the bush unless it addresses rural doctor shortage

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) has warned Prime Minister Kevin Rudd that unless the Federal Government's hospital reform package includes "serious measures" to combat the critical shortage of doctors and other health professionals in the bush, it is doomed to fail in rural Australia.

"The health reform debate has to be much larger than just hospitals—it must also be about getting enough health professionals on-the-ground to provide essential healthcare services" RDAA CEO, Steve Sant, said.

"Simply re-routing existing funding streams for rural hospitals while not doing anything to ensure they have more clinical staff to actually deliver services will only leave these hospitals in the same bad place—stretched to the limit in trying to meet patient demand in the face of a dire health workforce shortage.

"We've had enough tinkering around the edges. Rural hospitals and rural health services across the country urgently need more doctors and other health professionals to deliver their services—and the Rudd Government's hospital reform blueprint must include serious measures to achieve this.

"These measures are not rocket science—indeed, RDAA put a Rural Rescue Package in the PM's in-tray some years ago...on top of the same Package that had been placed in the same in-tray when John Howard was Prime Minister and Tony Abbott was Federal Health Minister.

"This Package would reward rural doctors for the isolation they face, as well as for the procedural services—such as obstetric, surgical, anaesthetic and emergency on-call services—they provide in rural communities.

"Yet despite a Rural Rescue Package being the only initiative capable of making a significant impact on the critical shortage of rural doctors across Australia, both the Howard Government and Rudd Government have studiously ignored our call for it.

"The bad news is that time is running out.

"At least 1800 additional doctors are urgently required in country Australia just to ensure basic access to healthcare in the bush. Many doctors working in rural Australia are also aged 55 years and over, and nearing retirement. Despite this, very few young doctors are being enticed to replace them.

"It is critical that in any forthcoming health and hospital reform blueprints, the Rudd Government makes it a priority to attract more doctors and other health professionals to rural Australia before the whole system, including the rural hospital system, falls in a heap and cannot be resuscitated."

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