

Media alert — Tuesday 27 October 2009

Worsening shortage of rural doctors to be key focus of national conference

***Rural Medicine Australia 2009* conference, Thursday 29 October to Sunday 1 November 2009
Rydges Hotel Bell City, Preston, Melbourne**

The worsening shortage of doctors across rural and remote Australia—and the continuing urgent need for a Rural Rescue Package to get and keep more of them in the bush—will be key issues discussed at a national conference of rural doctors from across Australia this Thursday to Sunday in Melbourne.

Rural Medicine Australia 2009, the joint annual conference of the Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) and the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM), will be attended by nearly 300 delegates including rural doctors, medical students and others.

The conference is being held at a time when critical services at rural hospitals in various states—notably Victoria and NSW—are being closed or are under increasing threat of closure. These much-needed services include maternity units and emergency departments.

Meanwhile, most state governments are doing very little to recruit more doctors to the bush—particularly those trained in procedural skills such as obstetrics, anaesthetics and emergency medicine. This is having a severe impact on the ability of many rural and remote Australians to access local critical care and primary care.

Rural Australians face a worsening shortage of health professionals, with at least 17,000 *additional* health professionals, including at least 1800 *additional* doctors, needed to ensure even basic healthcare in the bush.

A recent report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that, in terms of doctor-to-patient ratios, there have been significant declines in the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) primary care clinicians in inner and outer regional areas (those areas encompassing most rural towns throughout Australia). The report found:

- Australia's major cities had 95 primary care practitioners per 100,000 people (down 4% on 2003 figures)
- inner regional areas had only 85 primary care practitioners per 100,000 people (down 10.5% on 2003 figures)
- outer regional areas had only 84 primary care practitioners per 100,000 people (down 7.7% on 2003 figures)

At the conference, doctors will reiterate their call for:

- the introduction of a Rural Health Obligation by the federal and state governments to guarantee better local access to hospitals, health centres and health professionals for those living in rural and remote Australia, and to ensure state governments maintain critical hospital services (particularly obstetrics and emergency department services) in rural communities
- better supports for rural and remote patients who must travel to distant centres for treatment
- the Federal Government to introduce a Rural Rescue Package to entice, support and retain more doctors in rural and remote Australia
- the federal and state governments to fully reflect in any national health reforms the unique needs of rural health professionals and rural patients.

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The conference program will include:

A high level medico-political forum (10.30am to 12 midday, Friday)

Note: this forum is closed to media but commentary will be available immediately afterwards on request

This forum will consider what reforms recommended under the national health reform agenda will work in rural and remote Australia, what reforms won't work, what additional reforms are required, and the critical need for governments to fully reflect in any national health reforms the unique needs of rural health professionals and rural patients. The forum will also consider other action that the federal and state governments must take to entice and retain more doctors and other health professionals in the bush, keep rural hospitals and health services open, and ensure rural and remote Australians have better access to local healthcare; and how e-health technology will best be rolled out to rural and remote areas.

Other sessions/presentations include:

- A keynote speech by Dr Karl Stobbe, President of the Society of Rural Physicians of Canada
- A keynote speech by Peter Fleming, CEO of the National E-Health Transition Authority (NEHTA)
- *Balancing work and life* — a presentation and panel discussion for medical students and junior doctors
- *Taking care of yourself* — a mental health workshop for rural doctors themselves
- Rural Specialists Forum — to discuss critical issues impacting on specialists in rural Australia
- Exploring strategies for 'rural proofing' health policy
- A practice managers' workshop

Clinical skills workshops for rural doctors include:

- Paediatric anaesthetics, obstetric anaesthetics and anaesthetic emergencies
- Emergency skills training
- Advanced life support and trauma management
- Radiology, plastering and sedation in the Emergency Department
- Ultrasound in rural emergency medicine
- CTG foetal monitoring
- Dental emergencies
- Mental health core skills package for rural practice
- Skin cancer management
- Cancer care
- Stroke management
- *HIV in rural general practice* — HIV medicine workshop
- Palliative care presentation and workshop

Award presentations

The Westpac RDAA and ACRRM award winners for 2009 will be announced at a conference dinner on Saturday night.

Full conference program: www.acrrm.com.au

What, when and where: *Rural Medicine Australia 2009* will be held at Rydges Hotel Bell City, 205 Bell Street, Preston, Melbourne from Thursday 29 October to Sunday 1 November 2009. (A full day pre-conference meeting of RDAA's Board and various pre-conference workshops will be held on Thursday, with the main conference program beginning on Friday). Media are very welcome to attend.

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