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## Time for states to step up support for rural maternity services

Rural doctors fear some state governments are only paying lip service in their support of rural maternity services, with a forum at last week's Rural Medicine Australia 2024 conference highlighting fundamental shortcomings in rural health professionals being able to access ongoing skills maintenance through the larger regional hospitals.

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) has warned the state governments and health departments that they must return their focus to the needs of rural and remote women and their babies, to ensure they are providing them with quality care close to home.

“The forum heard that some large regional hospitals and tertiary health services are charging rural doctors a significant fee to participate in skills maintenance programs” **RDAA President, Dr RT Lewandowski, said.**

“In some locations, the fee is only charged if the rural doctor participating in skills maintenance is from another local health district, but it is a very worrying sign of larger health services not providing a baseline level of support to rural doctors and smaller rural hospitals in their outlying communities.



“This emerging trend of charging for skills maintenance has been identified across multiple sites and it needs to stop now.

“We call on state health ministers to immediately address this issue and ensure that rural doctors participating in any skills maintenance program provided by their regional health service are able to do so free of charge.

“These sessions are critical in ensuring local doctors are maintaining their current skills and updating their knowledge to align with best practice, which is in the best interest of health services and in the best interest of rural patients.

“It is hard enough for doctors to be able to take time away from the rural and remote communities they serve to participate in skills maintenance, and state health services should make this as easy as possible, not placing further barriers.”

**RDAA has also urged regional health services that do not already have structured skills maintenance programs in place for Rural Generalist (RG) doctors with advanced skills working in their rural health districts – such as RG Obstetricians, RG Anaesthetists, RGs with an advance skill in surgical procedures, RG Paediatricians, and RGs with an advance skill in mental health (to name a few) – to progress these as a matter of priority.**

“To not facilitate these opportunities is a clear failure in provision of care to rural and remote Australians,” **Dr Lewandowski said.**

“It is essential that barriers for rural doctors and midwives to access skills maintenance programs are removed. Skills maintenance programs should be built into normal workflows in health services for doctors and midwives, particularly to support rural and remote maternity services.

“There are some really innovative ways to achieve this, including through exchange programs, a rostered skills maintenance program where rural clinicians can reserve a slot over the course of a year, and interstate initiatives to support diversification of skill development.

“It is imperative that large regional hospitals and tertiary health services recognise they have an obligation not just to their immediate community but also to their surrounding region and the provision of quality and safe services for all of the communities within it. Servicing the entire area forms part of their funding provision.

“It is also time that senior medical practitioners working in these well-resourced centres, many of whom have spent only the minimum time in a rural or remote health service themselves, understand they have an obligation to support their rural and remote colleagues as well as the rural and remote patients who rely on smaller health facilities for accessing quality care.

“If rural and remote Australians were able to access a greater number of health services closer to home it would reduce patient transfers to the larger centres, freeing up beds and reducing waiting times – so it really is a win-win outcome.

“Rural and remote health is everyone’s business – not just the doctors, nurses and allied health professionals who work and live in these smaller communities.

“Most importantly, better supporting smaller rural facilities and their rural and remote health professionals should be considered a core responsibility of the larger regional hospitals and tertiary health services.”

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### [Photo of Dr RT Lewandowski](#)

#### Available for interview:

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