



NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH ALLIANCE INC

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Death rates 50% higher in very remote areas: focus needed on “worst first”

A recent report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) on death rates in rural and remote Australia reminds all of us that there is still much to be done to equalise life opportunities for those in disadvantaged areas. And it offers some positive news and a way forward for funders of health programs: focus on ‘worst first’. Most of the causes of higher death rates in those areas are preventable.

In its high-quality and valuable research, the AIHW has shown categorically that death rates in regional and remote areas are 10 per cent higher than in major cities, and 50 per cent higher in very remote areas.¹

The good news is that death rates have declined since 1992 in very remote areas faster than in metropolitan and rural areas. This has been due largely to some success with circulatory disease, respiratory disease and cancer. However in that period there has been very little reduction in deaths due to injury.

This important report also disentangles high Indigenous death rates and high overall mortality rates in rural and remote Australia. It has been known for some time that one of the main reasons for higher morbidity and mortality in remote areas is the higher proportion there of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However the report shows that living in rural and remote areas is in itself a risk to health, with a number of factors identified.

The Alliance has called on Government to allocate more resources to the AIHW’s work. It will help direct resources and effort to areas where they can have the greatest benefit. Such work can also provide benchmarks for measuring the value of taxpayer investment in rural health, for instance by tracking trends in ‘avoidable deaths’.

The report shows that the rate of morbidity and mortality is high overall in remote areas partly because of extraordinarily high rates in a few of them. The program and resource implications of this are clear: we must focus first on areas of greatest need, as proposed in *Healthy Horizons Outlook 2003-2007*, the strategic document adopted by all Health Departments around the country.

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¹ Rural, Regional and Remote Health: a study of mortality, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm?type=news>