



NATIONAL RURAL
HEALTH
ALLIANCE INC.

Policy Portion

Older People and Aged Care in Rural, Regional and Remote Australia



Most people prefer to age in their own dwelling and in their own community, and the National Rural Health Alliance and Aged and Community Services Australia are working together to make this possible in rural areas as it is in the cities. The two organisations produced a joint discussion paper (July 2004) and a policy statement (September 2005). They note that Australia's ageing is more marked in country areas. To achieve 'ageing in place', greater investment in planning, service provision, service access and service innovation is required. This will need continuing co-ordinated effort and investment from all levels of government.

This Policy Portion is based on the Alliance's Position Paper, *"Older People and Aged Care in Rural, Regional and Remote Australia"* (2005) produced in conjunction with Aged & Community Services Australia (2005). Copies of that full paper are available from <http://www.ruralhealth.org.au/nrhpublic/Index.cfm>, by contacting the National Rural Health Alliance on 02 6285 4660 or by emailing nrha@ruralhealth.org.au

WHY THIS ISSUE IS IMPORTANT TO PEOPLE IN RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA

Most people prefer to age in their own place. This may be in their own home or in supported accommodation in their own community. It is of particular significance for people living in rural and remote Australia for two main reasons:

- in these communities, a higher proportion of the population is elderly; and
- for smaller communities and more dispersed populations, providing a range of models of care and support within reasonable proximity as the needs of people change presents economic and workforce challenges.

Furthermore, both health and income tend to be worse in rural communities. The resultant effects for rural and remote Australians are greater social isolation; more limited economic means; limited access to transport, residential and community care; and greater difficulties accessing specialist medical, surgical and preventative services than for people in urban areas.

Equitable investment and co-ordinated effort by government and service providers will be required to provide reasonable infrastructure and services for the elderly in rural and remote Australia.

BASIS AND EVIDENCE

A higher proportion of the rural and remote population is elderly than is the case for city dwellers. Internal migration is a contributing factor: both of young people from the country moving to the city for education and work opportunities, and of retirees from urban areas moving to the country.

Evidence shows that subsidies paid for residential care are inadequate in rural and remote settings, and that delivery of care costs more in these areas. The proposed new system for distributing resources for residential care may reduce the amount of funding allocated to residents with low levels of need. This is of particular concern to rural providers as they often have a larger number of residents in these categories. This is due to the small population of potential residents and the lack of community supports available to assist older people to remain at home.

Furthermore, existing frameworks for raising capital are inadequate, making commercial investment in aged care facilities in many rural and remote areas unattractive.

The relative shortage of aged care workers and skills contributes to limited availability and scope of aged care services in rural and remote areas. Wage rates in the aged care sector are lower than for acute care health professionals, which further compromises the provision of care for elderly people in country areas.

Finally, access to aged care, health care and ancillary services (such as transport, carer respite, emergency respite, aids and supports etc) is more limited in country areas, and their scope often less comprehensive.

These factors lead to more limited access and higher direct costs for country people and combine to directly compromise the quality of life for elderly people living in rural and remote Australia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

More equitable outcomes for country people can be achieved with changes in planning and funding arrangements, increased workforce availability and other improvements in access to services.

Planning and Funding

1. A range of flexible models of aged care should be available that are tailored to meet the needs of local communities. There should be research and development grants that deliver new ways for care provision to be developed and evaluated. Beneficiaries of this will include Indigenous and other culturally diverse groups. Further grants should enable investigation and adoption of appropriate information and communications technology (ICT), networking, alliances and resource management arrangements that would support the economic sustainability of aged care services in country areas.
2. In consultation with rural communities of interest, the public and private sectors should plan for rural aged care services that are fair, flexible and sustainable.

Workforce

1. The Australian government should develop a national aged care workforce strategy. This would include giving a high priority to addressing the wage differential between acute and aged care sector nursing. The new workforce strategy would improve outcomes in undergraduate, postgraduate, vocational training, continuing professional development and other elements of the recruitment and retention system for rural and remote settings.

Access

1. Greater consistency and improvement in the patient transport assistance schemes across government sectors would provide better access to care for older people living in rural and remote communities. (Further detail is available in the Alliance's Policy Portion on *Transport and Accommodation Assistance for Health Patients from Rural and Remote Areas*.)
2. Specifically, improved funding arrangements for emergency and non-emergency ambulance use to enable universal free-to-end-user access would reduce inequity for people living and ageing in rural and remote communities.