



Action on rural and remote health can lead the way

Country people were disappointed that their health needs were ignored in the recent election campaign. They hope there will be a renewed focus on rural and remote health by the incoming government. Because health in rural and remote areas is poorer than in major cities, action to improve it will both reduce a serious inequity and provide some 'low hanging fruit' for a government wishing to make the greatest difference to national health averages.

Rural and remote areas are home to the most innovative and resilient people, including health professionals. This means that, despite the adversity they face, rural and remote areas already provide many of the best examples of practical, integrated, multidisciplinary health care.

The current focus on rural and regional affairs provides an incoming government with the opportunity to meet three distinct targets through an integrated approach to improved health for country people. First, it will provide the focus on rural and remote communities that many are now demanding. Second, it can enhance the equity of Australia's health system and its outcomes. Third, it can provide the greatest returns for new investment in health and health-related services by targeting those in greatest need and helping Australia as a whole to meet national health targets. Such actions will also inform the development of strategies to meet the growing needs of major cities.

The incoming Government's response to this opportunity for rural health should be led at Prime Ministerial level. An Office for Rural and Remote Australia should be established in the Prime Minister's Department. Through this Office, the Prime Minister will be responsible for a range of action to improve the sustainability of rural communities and health outcomes for country people.

The action program would consist of seven parts.

1 Build the nation through sustainable communities

A wide range of policy instruments can be used to promote regional development, including remote zone tax allowances, needs-based rural infrastructure investments, public transport and new industries related to the mitigation of climate change. However, the one most urgent priority for sustainable communities is **broadband**. The incoming government should make nation-building investments in broadband to ensure that all people, wherever they live, can access the same high level of broadband as others in the nation, available to them at the same price and delivered by whatever means is most effective for each particular area.

2 Commitment to proceed with health reform

The incoming government should commit to the Commonwealth taking policy and funding responsibility for primary care, aged care and integrated care (such as multipurpose services) in smaller communities. It should proceed with the establishment of Medicare Locals and Local Hospital Networks that are truly local, emphasising communities of interest and patient flows, including those across state borders. There may be merit in designating some Medicare Locals as 'reform incubators' in which workforce innovation can be piloted and evaluated.



3 Flexible additions to health infrastructure on the basis of need

The incoming government should commit to delivering health infrastructure to rural and remote areas on the basis of the needs of each community for such infrastructure, with additional investment going to whichever health facility in each locality is best placed to enhance local service delivery. Care needs to be taken about the impact of new infrastructure on existing privately-owned facilities.

4 A fair share of hospital resources

The incoming government should commit to delivering to acute care facilities in rural and remote areas a measurable and fair share of the extra money to be spent on hospitals (beds, emergency departments, elective surgery, subacute care, mental health etc). In rural and remote areas, equivalent resources may at times be better directed to services that are 'better than hospital beds'.

5 Workforce development and redistribution

The incoming government should urgently commit to an integrated and targeted package of measures to build the health workforce and redistribute it to rural, regional and remote areas, including:

- a. initiatives for practice nurses, nurse practitioners and dental scholarships;
- b. a specific focus on the oral health service workforce, with the establishment of a foundation year for new dental graduates, HECS reimbursement for rural service by dentists and oral therapists and hygienists, and a new Commonwealth Dental Health Program; and
- c. new Medicare items to improve access to telehealth consultations through a local GP, practice nurse, allied health professional or nurse practitioner in rural and remote communities. Such new initiatives should build on existing health workforce programs.

6 Augmenting the ASGC – RA system for classifying rurality

The incoming government should augment or modify the ASGC-RA system to reduce the anomalies of the current system and make it a fairer basis for determining program eligibility and funding.

7 Provide coherence through a new National Rural and Remote Health Plan

Housing these actions in the Prime Minister's Department will support the development already underway of a new national rural and remote health plan. Such a plan will provide all jurisdictions with an agreed vision for rural and remote health, strategies for improving outcomes, and measurable targets against which to assess progress.