



SARRAH

Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health

HOW ABOUT A REAL PLAN FOR ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE FOR ALL AUSTRALIANS?

Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health (SARRAH), the peak body for allied health professionals working in rural and remote Australia, calls on the Federal Government, Opposition and all Federal politicians and aspirants to prioritise access to the full array of health services for all Australians.

There should be vigorous debate, especially in the lead up to the Federal Election contesting how Australians, wherever they live, can access the ‘universal health care’ we pride ourselves on as a nation but too often fail to deliver.

Alongside the many calls for more General Practitioners delivering primary health care - especially in rural and remote Australia – we also need other health professionals like physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, dietitians and others to ensure that Australians have a full suite of affordable, accessible services to maintain their health and well-being.

Every politician interested in health knows people in rural and remote Australia deal with:

- higher levels of chronic disease
- higher rates of unnecessary hospitalisation for conditions that could have been prevented if they got the right care when they needed it
- shorter average life spans than their counterparts in metropolitan areas
- greater rates of disability and
- poorer access to the health services they need – because the workforce isn’t there, they are too far away or the costs and wait times are too great.

Right now, Australia has more doctors per head of population than most OECD countries. They are critically important and more need to be working in rural areas. But vital as they are, doctors are not the only health professionals people need to be able to access. In fact, other health professionals - nurses and midwives, psychologists, physiotherapists, audiologists, medical radiation practitioners, podiatrists, speech pathologists, pharmacists, occupational therapists, paramedics, dietitians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers, podiatrists, optometrists, dentists and dental therapists and many more – represent about 85 per cent of the health professional workforce nationally. These people don’t only provide care when you are really sick, they help you stay well and out of hospital. Long-standing workforce shortages across much of rural and remote Australia mean people often have little or no access to the care and services they, their children, their aged parents and others need. These shortages are well known to governments.

As vital as GPs are, our political leaders must start taking seriously and commit to building a fit-for-purpose multidisciplinary health workforce, skilled in team-based care. In the lead-up to the Federal election, SARRAH calls on our politicians to take an inclusive approach to the debate on healthcare; an approach that includes but extends beyond more doctors and

nurses and includes allied health professionals, recognising the value they bring to comprehensive primary health and other care services.

An inclusive primary healthcare system and strategy would ensure that a diverse, highly skilled and well-distributed workforce is available to deliver the care Australians need. Building and keeping a system that is fit-for-purpose and up-to-date is hard work. But it is exactly what we need from our Governments, whoever they are.

Can anyone genuinely describe Australia's health system as universal while these health disparities are well known and continue to exist?

Allied health workforce and service shortages impact people living in rural and remote Australia adversely every day. Addressing them should be an urgent priority. Allied health professionals (AHPs) contribute in thousands of ways to improve peoples' health and wellbeing. One example was highlighted yesterday by [NPS MedicineWise](#), the expert, national, not-for-profit organisation committed to supporting quality use of medicines to improve health decisions and health and economic outcomes in Australia. They reminded us that opioids are used more in regional Australia to help manage pain, but using opioids is often not the best way to manage chronic pain and can further damage your health. With alternative treatments, people may find their pain levels reduce or stop when they can reduce opioid use. As Dr Caroline West, GP and medical advisor at NPS MedicineWise said *"A pain management plan involves you working together with your doctor and maybe also specialists and allied-health professionals like a physiotherapist."*

The critical shortage of AHPs in rural Australia means people often can't access these alternative treatments. Until that is fixed, many of them will continue to rely on opioids even if it does damage their health. This is one example among many where Australians living in rural and remote miss out on services.

AHPs are highly qualified. They are trained to help people stay well, regain strength and capacity in physical, sensory, psychological, cognitive, social and cultural functioning. They provide expert care to every age group and across the health, aged care, education and disability service sectors. But there are not enough of them: only about half as many in rural Australia as we need and the shortage is getting worse. Still no national plan exists to address this, despite calls for one to be established, going back years.

Health should be among the highest priorities for candidates in the coming Federal election. How much do they know about access to the services people need? Surely one of the most important questions for anyone who wants to represent their community and contribute to our national wellbeing is "Can people access the health care they need – including allied health care – where and when they need it?"

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SARRAH is the peak body representing rural and remote allied health professionals (AHPs) working in public, private and/or community settings SARRAH advocates on behalf of rural and remote Australian communities. SARRAH maintains that every Australian should have access to health services wherever they live, and the allied health services are fundamental to the well-being of all Australians.
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