

## Better Digital Connectivity to Improve Health Care of Rural Australians

2022

### 1. Background

- 1.1 Regional, rural and remote Australians often struggle to access health services that urban Australians see as a basic right. These inequalities have led to lower life expectancy, worse outcomes on leading indicators of health, and poorer access to care compared to people in major cities.
- 1.2 The [2022 AMA Rural Health Issues Survey](#) identified access to high-speed broadband for medical practices as a key priority. This result reflects not only the increasing reliance by medical practices on the internet for day-to-day operations, but also the increasing opportunities for the provision of healthcare services to rural and remote communities via eHealth and telemedicine. For the full potential of these opportunities to be realised, good quality, affordable, and reliable high-speed internet access is essential.
- 1.3 The AMA recognises that technology-based patient consultations and other telehealth initiatives can improve access to care and can enhance efficiency in medical practice, but the need for better digital connectivity goes beyond supporting rural and remote health. In today's world, it is a critical factor to support communities in their daily activities, education, and business, and has the potential to drive innovation and boost the rural economy.
- 1.4 This position statement outlines the importance of better digital connectivity for medical practices, other healthcare providers and institutions, and patients, to improve regional, rural and remote health care in Australia, and highlights key solutions for achieving this.

### 2. The need for better digital connectivity

- 2.1 While the national broadband network (NBN) has been able to support city dwellers, regional Australians are still dealing with unreliable broadband to work from home, accessing internet, conducting videoconference meetings or accessing telehealth services. Two-thirds of NBN users in regional areas were having speed issues over the network.<sup>i</sup>
- 2.2 Connectivity challenges are also explored in detail through the Australian Government's 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review which found that in more remote areas the internet connection is still very poor.<sup>ii</sup>
- 2.3 Telehealth can reduce or minimise travel challenges and burdens patients encounter in accessing healthcare as well as in reducing the risk of community transmission of coronavirus during COVID-19 pandemic. However, the rapid adoption of telehealth during COVID-19 pandemic appears to have led to health inequalities in the distribution of healthcare services and resources among different populations, which identified specific vulnerable patient groups including those who are living rurally who are missing out on these services.
- 2.4 Significant increase on claimed MBS telehealth items during the pandemic proves that telehealth has effectively maintained accessibility of health care during the pandemic when there has been a decrease in face to face consultations. While telehealth has been an important lifeline for people in rural, regional and remote Australia during the pandemic, the utilisation of telehealth and telemedicine in rural and remote Australia remains patchy and is not used to full potential because of digital connectivity issue.
- 2.5 As mainstream healthcare provision becomes increasingly technology based and requires more and faster broadband services to operate, there is a real risk that regional, rural and remote areas of Australia will be left further and further behind in their ability to access quality health services.

- 2.6 Telehealth has transformed primary care in this country from face-to-face to virtual or audio models of care. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of technology literacy, maturity and readiness in adapting telehealth to support integrated person-centred health care.<sup>iii</sup>
- 2.7 Technology telecommunications changes the way medical education, training and supervision is delivered in rural and remote areas.<sup>iv</sup> As pressure on access to prevocational and vocational training places increases, harnessing technology to support training is a viable strategy to create additional training places in rural and remote locations and ultimately improve access to specialist services for rural and remote patients.
- 2.8 Improved telecommunications technology will enhance the learning experiences for doctors in training at rural sites and during rural rotations, provide exposure to innovative models of care, and improve supervisor capacity by allowing supervisors to transfer knowledge, supervise and mentor trainees remotely. Improved telecommunications technology will also allow doctors who live and work in rural and remote areas to access their continuous professional development activities, thereby preventing service disruption by having these doctors leave their communities and travel long distances to do this training.

### 3. AMA Position

- 3.1 To enhance health care services for rural and remote Australians through technology telecommunications, governments should focus on improving mobile coverage and performance, as well as broadband and enhancing the resilience of telecommunications infrastructure to natural disasters.
- 3.2 The platforms must be able to accommodate developments in information and communications technologies and provide digital connectivity through suitable combinations of fibre, mobile phone, wireless, and satellite technologies.
- 3.3 The Government must ensure that broadband services are reliable and affordable for all communities, business and services throughout the country. Government policies play a tremendous role in bringing internet access to remote regions.
- 3.4 The AMA urges the Government to consider the following actions to achieve better healthcare through digital connectivity in rural and remote Australia:
- 3.4.1 Fully consider the recommendations of the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review and adopt Recommendations 2, 6, 9, and 12<sup>v</sup>:
- Enhanced Connectivity Investments: that the Government continues, but significantly strengthens and enhances, its commitment to large-scale multi-year connectivity investments.
  - NBN Co regional delivery: that NBN Co commits to providing holistic upgrades to their regional fixed wireless network to allow users to access faster network speeds and minimize network congestion.
  - Mobile Services: that the Government ensures measures are undertaken to increase the accuracy and transparency of mobile network quality and coverage information, including network congestion.
  - Affordability: the removal of data charges for low income and income support recipient consumers in regional, rural and remote Australia accessing all Australian, state and territory government services, to improve the affordability of telecommunications for these users.<sup>vi</sup>
- 3.4.2 Identify the black spots and marginal areas that are uncovered by broadband networks through mapping and prioritise those areas when expanding NBN infrastructures.

- 3.4.3 Provide reasonable reparation time to any NBN infrastructure issues to minimise obstructions to the communities.
- 3.4.4 Extend the boundaries of the NBN's fibre cable and fixed wireless footprints and mobile coverage wherever possible.
- 3.4.5 Develop measures to prioritise or optimise the broadband capacity available by satellite for hospitals and medical practices, such as exempting or allocating higher data allowance quotas, or providing a separate data allowance (as is the case with distance education<sup>vii</sup>).
- 3.4.6 Provide free internet access and information technology training to support telehealth and telemedicine for low socioeconomic status communities in regional, rural and remote Australia.
- 3.4.7 Create universal unmetered online access to government, hospital and health services for people and businesses in rural and remote areas.<sup>viii</sup>
- 3.4.8 Engage with state and local government and related stakeholders who wish to co-invest or coordinate planning to achieve the optimum overall infrastructure outcome for their area. This could involve public-private partnerships or the leveraging of philanthropic infrastructure funding through, for example, tax concessions.

### Relevant AMA advocacy

[2022 AMA Rural Health Issues Survey](#)

[AMA Scoping Review on The Need for Better Digital Connectivity to Improve Health Care of Rural Australians](#)

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### References

- <sup>i</sup> Information Age (2020), *Regional Australians still living an NBN nightmare*, accessed on 9 May 2022 <https://ia.acs.org.au/article/2020/regional-australians-still-living-an-nbn-nightmare.html>
- <sup>ii</sup> Australian Government (2021), *Regional Telecommunications Review: A step change in demand*.
- <sup>iii</sup> Jonnagaddala, Jitendra, Myron Anthony Godinho, and Siaw-Teng Liaw. (2021). From telehealth to virtual primary care in Australia? A Rapid scoping review. *International journal of medical informatics*, 151:104470.
- <sup>iv</sup> Wozniak, H., Ellaway, R. H., & de Jong, P. G. (2018). What have we learnt about using digital technologies in health professional education? *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 209(10), 431-433.
- <sup>v</sup> Australian Government (2021), op. cit.
- <sup>vi</sup> Australian Government (2021), op. cit.
- <sup>vii</sup> Australian Government (2016), *Australian Government Response to the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee Report: Regional Telecommunications Review 2015*.
- <sup>viii</sup> Broadband for the Bush Alliance (2016), *Broadband for the Bush Forum V: Digital Journeys Communiqué*.