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**Poor digital connectivity affecting health of rural Australians**

The Australian Medical Association says poor digital connectivity is affecting the health of rural Australians and preventing rural doctors from providing quality digital healthcare in rural and remote Australia.

With flooding and other climate disasters continuing to affect rural communities, the AMA is calling on the government to improve mobile phone coverage and internet connectivity and enhance the resilience of telecommunications infrastructure to natural disasters.

AMA President Professor Steve Robson said too many Australians living outside metropolitan areas are missing out on life-saving telehealth consultations and other care due to poor internet connectivity and digital infrastructure.

“Regional, rural and remote Australians often struggle to access the health services that urban Australians see as a basic right. These inequalities have led to lower life expectancy, worse outcomes on leading health indicators, and poorer access to care compared to people in major cities.

“We’re calling on the government to provide good quality, affordable, and reliable high-speed internet access to rural communities that people in cities have as a matter of course,” Professor Robson said.

Dr Ian Kamerman, chair of the AMA’s Council of Rural Doctors and a GP practicing in Tamworth said telehealth has been a real boon for medical care in rural areas, enabling easier access for patients to their doctors but the lack of infrastructure has meant the telehealth experience is far from seamless.

“Many patients don’t have the capability to connect to their doctor using video. Even when they do have the right phone, many patients are unable to afford a plan that has enough data to allow a video connection. After getting over those hurdles, I still find many consultations end up unsuccessful due to poor connectivity, and having patients move between rooms or outside to continue the conversation.

“Medical practices rely on the internet for day-to-day operations and use e-health and telemedicine to reach their rural and remote patients, but the patchy nature of the internet in the bush means the full potential of these opportunities is not being realised.

“As mainstream healthcare 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.

“It has been even worse for rural patients since July when the government proceeded with changes put in place by the former Government that removed the Medicare rebate for longer telephone consultation but kept rebates only for video calls of

20–40 minutes. This effectively excludes rural patients' access Medicare rebate through video telehealth because they just can't be done.

“Many of our communities are again dealing with flooding and communications are vital during these times. The AMA is currently advocating for public and private health care services in disaster-affected rural and regional areas to be considered essential services for disaster support and recovery, so we need reliable digital platforms to support this vital work.

“The government has done its own review of services in the bush and they should implement the recommendations made in 2021,” Dr Kamerman said.

**The main calls to government in the [AMA Position Statement](#) include:**

- ensuring digital platforms can accommodate developments in information and communications technologies and provide digital connectivity through suitable combinations of fibre, mobile phone, wireless, and satellite technologies
- ensure 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)
- consider and implement recommendations of the [2021 Regional Telecommunications Review](#) and adopt recommendations 2, 6, 9, and 12 which relate to:
  - multi-year connectivity investment
  - NBN Co whole-of-system upgrades to regional fixed wireless networks and undertake measures to increase the accuracy and transparency of mobile network quality and coverage information, including network congestion
  - remove data charges for low income and income support recipients in regional, rural and remote Australia accessing all state, territory and federal government services, to improve the affordability for these users
- identify the black spots and marginal areas that are uncovered by broadband networks through mapping and prioritise those areas when expanding NBN infrastructures.
- create universal unmetered online access to government, hospital and health services for people and businesses in rural and remote areas.

Read the AMA's [scoping review for better digital connectivity to improve rural healthcare](#)

Read the government's [recommendations and its review into Regional Telecommunications](#)

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