



## Media release

24 January 2022

### **New rural doctors' agreement a lifeline for regional patients**

**An agreement between South Australia's rural doctors and SA Health will secure desperately needed health services in regional communities that have lost or been in danger of losing their local doctors.**

After 18 months of negotiations with SA Health's Rural Support Service (RSS), the Australian Medical Association in South Australia (AMA(SA)) and Rural Doctors' Association of SA (RDASA) have reached an agreement that appropriately recognises the roles and effort of rural doctors in their communities.

RDASA President and Murray Bridge general practitioner (GP) Dr Peter Rischbieth said it was an "extreme relief" to reach a point where RDASA and AMA(SA) believe their members will be able to continue working for their patients and communities.

"Maintaining a local rural doctor workforce in a regional area is the difference between medical services being available and entire services shutting down, resulting in significant travel times for the members of these communities as well as poorer health outcomes," Dr Rischbieth said.

AMA(SA) Vice President and Port Lincoln general practitioner Dr John Williams said the new agreement will bring significant benefits to rural communities, including a more sustainable rural doctor workforce.

The agreement provides a minimum guarantee that must be offered to a rural GP who also works with public hospital patients as a Visiting Medical Officer (VMO). Dr Williams said GP VMOs had been working in these roles without contracts for 19 months, with six rounds of AMA(SA) and RDASA negotiations with RSS needed over 12 months to reach a resolution.

"For many rural doctors, the agreement will change the way their remuneration works, making rural hospital work more comparable in terms of conditions and remuneration to that received by their metropolitan public hospital colleagues," Dr Williams said.

"It recognises and reflects the on-call and out-of-hours work that rural doctors consistently perform and increases opportunities for us to influence how our local hospitals manage patient care."

Dr Rischbieth said the successful delivery of health services in many regional towns relies on GP VMOs providing crucial services in their local hospitals, including accident and emergency care; critical inpatient, surgical and post-operative care; and obstetrics support. He said much of this work includes being on-call for significant periods of time and being called to the hospital at any time of the day or night.

"We are extremely pleased that the agreement gives rural doctors more attractive options to negotiate their employment contracts, with terms that better suit them," Dr Rischbieth said.

“It increases their remuneration and includes bonuses for doctors who choose to work in the most remote locations in the state – areas that have been very difficult to recruit to. It also recognises that GP VMOs have been working off-contract and provides reasonable back-pay in the form of a ‘sign-on fee’.

“It’s a huge relief for the doctors serving rural South Australia to now have options to remain providing care to their communities, and boosts their ability to attract the next generation of doctors to their towns.”

Key improvements in the new agreement include:

- a South Australian Government injection of more than 20 per cent into the GP Agreement Budget to support the new initiatives
- a sign-up bonus of up to \$50,000 for a doctor to work in the more remote areas of the state
- the ability for a doctor to choose either a new sessional (hourly) rate for hospital work or remain with the current fee-for-service structure
- a previously unavailable process that allows a GP to dispute their offer from their Local Health Network and seek modification through a formal process
- better IT and infrastructure to help GPs care for patients efficiently.

“SA Health has agreed to negotiate in the next 12 months, outside of this GP agreement, for further supports for GP Registrars,” Dr Williams said. “SA Health has also agreed to review the indexation process to align more fairly with CPI changes.”

The formal contracts are expected to be available for GPs to consider by 31 January 2022.

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**Dr John Williams and Dr Peter Rischbieth will lead a Zoom media conference at 1 pm today. Please register [HERE](#).**

**They will have limited opportunities for phone interviews after that time.**

**Available for interview:           Dr Peter Rischbieth, RDASA President – 0408 813 143  
  Dr John Williams, AMA(SA) Vice President – 0417 804 212**

**Media contacts:                       RDAA – Ineke Kuiper – 0408 669 638  
  AMA(SA) – Karen Phillips – 0402 103 451**