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FEDERAL BUDGET 2018: AMA WELCOMES “STRONGER RURAL HEALTH STRATEGY”

The AMA welcomes tonight’s Budget announcement of a range of initiatives to improve access to health services for rural and regional Australians.

AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, said that many of the initiatives – outlined in the Stronger Rural Health Strategy as part of the Health Budget – are a direct response to AMA rural health policies and the AMA Budget Submission.

“We welcome the Government’s strong focus in this Budget on improving access to doctors in underserved communities, particularly rural Australia,” Dr Gannon said.

“The evidence shows that selecting medical students with a rural background and providing high quality training in rural areas are the most effective policy measures to address workforce maldistribution.

“With medical graduate numbers in Australia at record numbers, well above the OECD average, there is a strong emphasis in this Budget on building a rural training pipeline so that it will be possible for doctors to complete their medical degree in a rural area - and then continue to be able to work and train in these areas.

“The decision to reject the proposal for a stand-alone Murray Darling Medical School, in favour of a network, is a better approach with the Government instead pursuing a policy that builds on existing infrastructure to create end-to-end medical school programs.

“However, while the Government has made a welcome commitment not to increase Commonwealth-supported medical school places, it has taken the unnecessary step of compensating medical schools with additional overseas full-fee paying places.

“This will not address community need, and instead simply waste precious resources.

“We welcome the decision to create a pool of medical school places that can be reallocated over time, a nimble way of better responding to community need.

“The AMA has championed a Community Residency Program, focusing on rural areas, and the significant expansion of prevocational training places in general practice announced tonight delivers on that policy proposal.

“The decision to set aside funding for an extra 100 GP training places from 2021, earmarked for the proposed National Rural Generalist Pathway (NRGP), is a good first step in supporting its rollout.

“This will build on the work of the Rural Health Commissioner, who is currently consulting on the design of the NRGP.

“It is also good to see that the Government is funding support for non-vocationally registered doctors to progress to College Fellowship. Rural areas are very reliant on International Medical Graduates (IMGs) to deliver care, and this decision will help them in continuing to deliver high quality care for patients.

“The AMA is also pleased to see the Government take the decision to completely overhaul the bonded medical graduate programs, which have so far largely failed to deliver extra doctors to needy communities.

“The new arrangements will be more flexible, and provide greater career certainty for doctors who have signed up for these programs.”

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