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DOCTORS AND PATIENTS IN RURAL AND REGIONAL AUSTRALIA DESERVE BETTER FUNDED AND RESOURCED HEALTH SERVICES

AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, said today that the stories revealed in this week’s *Four Corners* program on ABC TV were tragic and should never have happened, but they are indicative of a much bigger problem that rural communities have faced for decades – poor or no access to the high quality health services enjoyed by Australians in larger regional centres and the capital cities.

Dr Bartone said that Australia has one of the best health systems in the world, with a highly trained and skilled workforce, but not all Australians have equal access to all the benefits.

“Our rural doctors and other health professionals are highly skilled, totally dedicated to their communities, and provide high quality care to their patients – in general practices, public hospitals, and other settings,” Dr Bartone said.

“Australians living outside of the cities (*around 29 per cent of the population according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare*) have higher rates of major diseases like cancer and diabetes, experience worse health outcomes generally, access Medicare at lower rates, and often have to travel long distances for extended periods to receive appropriate specialised care.

“Our hardworking rural doctors work very long and sometimes unusual hours, many are constantly on call, they provide high quality care leading multi-disciplinary health care teams, and they are committed to their patients and local communities.

“But they are working in environments and with equipment that are not keeping pace with modern and complex medicine, and the unique health and emergency demands of remote and isolated communities.

“The hospital infrastructure, the equipment, and overall resourcing are in most areas not at the levels available in the cities and larger centres.

“Rural health is at a crisis point. There is an urgent need for significant investment in rural hospitals, equipment, and medical and health workforce.

“Despite the difficulties and challenges, the rural health workforce continues to provide quality care.

“The incidents shown on *Four Corners* were tragic and avoidable, but they were also rare and isolated. Our most sincere sympathies go to the families and everybody affected by these events. We need to learn from the system failures to ensure they do not happen again.”

Dr Bartone said that key findings from the 2019 AMA Rural Health Issues Survey of rural doctors include:

- the need for urgent and major extra funding and resources to support improved staffing levels at rural hospitals;
- the need for significant new funding to ensure that rural hospitals have modern facilities and equipment; and
- the need for coordinated medical workforce planning.

Dr Bartone acknowledged that the Federal Government has recently acted with a National Medical Workforce Strategy and the National Rural Generalist Pathway, but so much more needs to be done.

“These initiatives will help deliver more highly-trained doctors to communities in the future,” Dr Bartone said.

“We now need to see greater emphasis on selecting rural origin medical students and providing more medical training in rural and remote locations to build a stronger rural medical workforce.

“But this won’t solve the immediate problems, though.

“The AMA calls on the Federal and State and Territory governments to work together to provide funding, resourcing, and planning decisions to give rural and remote Australians better access to quality care with modern equipment and well-equipped and staffed hospitals.

“We need governments to build on success stories where there is evidence that earlier clinical assessment and better coordination results in acute patients getting to tertiary hospitals and saving lives.

“Patient transfer systems alone are not the total solution, but they must be supported and properly resourced to maximise their effectiveness.

“A good example is in rural South Australia where an efficient retrieval system for rural heart attack patients has cut the mortality rate by a third.

“The key is improving the links between bush and city hospitals.

“All Australians need and deserve to be able to get equitable access to the right health care at the right time – no matter where they live, and no matter their circumstances.

“Equity and access cannot be second rate depending on your location,” Dr Bartone said.

The AMA will write to Health Ministers demanding that rural health funding be a priority for the next meetings of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and the COAG Health Council.

12 September 2019

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