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MAJOR PARTIES MUST STEP UP ON RURAL HEALTH: AMA

Country Australia needs more doctors and other health professionals, improved internet access and better hospital facilities, according to an AMA survey of the top issues affecting rural health.

Almost 600 doctors who took part in the AMA Rural Health Issues Survey 2016 said extra funding and resources to support the recruitment and retention of doctors and other health professionals was their top priority in trying to meet the health care needs of their patients.

In a sign of the growing use of, and reliance on, internet-based communications and data, the survey found access to high speed broadband has jumped as a priority since the last survey in 2007, and is now ranked second in importance.

Rural doctors also attached great significance to ensuring country hospitals have modern facilities and equipment, and that more should be done to encourage and support the training of doctors in rural areas.

AMA President Dr Michael Gannon said the survey’s findings highlighted what needed to be done to improve the health of Australians living in rural areas.

“Doctors and other health workers in rural areas do a fantastic job in often tough conditions,” Dr Gannon said.

“Despite this, we know people living in regional and rural Australia have lower life expectancy and poorer health than those in the cities, and access to care is a big part of the problem.

“To close the health gap with other Australians, we have to ensure people living in country areas can get to see a doctor or go to a hospital when they need it.

“We have record numbers of medical school places and, with sufficient numbers of medical graduates coming through, the focus must now be on how we can get them to work in the places they are needed the most.

“Unfortunately, both major parties appear to be taking rural Australia for granted. Neither has made major policy commitments to rural health so far in this election campaign, and they need to step up now.”

Last month the AMA released its *Plan for Better Health Care for Regional, Rural, and Remote Australia*, and Dr Gannon urged the major parties to adopt its recommendations.

“To close the rural-city health gap, it is essential that policies and resources are tailored to cater for the unique demands of rural health care,” the AMA President said.

The AMA Plan proposes a focus on four key areas - rebuilding country hospital infrastructure; supporting recruitment and retention of doctors; encouraging more young doctors to work in rural areas; and supporting rural practices.

“Addressing and investing in these measures will make a long-term difference to the health of Australians living in rural communities,” Dr Gannon said.

The AMA's policy recommendations are reflected in the results of the Rural Health Issues Survey.

Doctors who took part said that for there to be genuine improvements in access to health care for rural patients, there needed to be:

- funding and resources to support improved staffing levels and workable rosters for rural doctors;
- access to high speed broadband;
- investment in hospital and practice infrastructure;
- expanded opportunities for medical training and education in rural areas;
- improved support for GP proceduralists; and
- better access to locum relief.

The AMA Rural Health Issues Survey 2016 can be viewed at: <https://ama.com.au/article/rural-health-issues-survey-report>

The AMA *Plan for Better Health Care for Regional, Rural, and Remote Australia* is at <https://ama.com.au/position-statement/plan-better-health-care-regional-rural-and-remote-australia>

21 June 2016

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