

# MEDIA RELEASE



**RURAL DOCTORS  
ASSOCIATION  
OF AUSTRALIA**  
*Caring for the Country*

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## Doctors plead Government: charge the paddles and revive rural health in Budget '08

The Federal Government's Rural Health Workforce Audit has provided yet more evidence that rural health is in full-blown cardiac arrest and underlines why next week's Budget must include real measures to get more doctors and other health professionals to the bush, the Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) has warned.

"The results of the Rural Health Workforce Audit were much worse than even we had expected" RDAA President, Dr Peter Rischbieth, said. "They provide yet more evidence of the chronic shortage of doctors and other health professionals across rural and remote Australia, and demonstrate just how much urgent work needs to be done in combatting this crisis.

"In short, the rural health sector is in full-blown cardiac arrest and only the Government can charge the resus paddles.

"While we can understand the Rudd Government might want to take some time in further assessing the rural health workforce crisis before forming an action plan, there is simply not the luxury of time available. After years of reviews, now is the time for action.

"The truth is we once had a huge paddock full of rural doctors but they have been pouring out of a gap in the fence for years. The Government can spend a further twelve months analysing what it should do about the gap and—at the same time—watch even more doctors getting out of rural practice, or it can bite the bullet, invest in some much-needed repairs and also put some real incentives in place. This might cost a little more than leaving a gap in the fence, but at the end of the day it will encourage a whole lot more doctors to stay in the paddock.

"Waiting until next year's Budget before implementing any meaningful package to turn the rural health workforce crisis around will only see more doctors leaving the bush because of burnout or retirement, and more young medical graduates choosing the path to city-based specialist practice rather than rural medicine. It will also risk more small rural hospitals being downgraded or closed because state governments can use the excuse that there are not enough doctors and other health professionals to staff them.

"One of the most critical items we need in next week's Budget is a Rural Rescue Package to entice more doctors to rural and remote Australia. Put forward last year by RDAA and the AMA, this cost-effective package has attracted significant support from many quarters and comprises:

- **a Rural Isolation Payment** to be paid to all rural doctors (including GPs, specialists and registrars) to reflect the isolation associated with rural practice; and
- **a Rural Procedural and Emergency/On Call Loading** to better support rural procedural doctors (including procedural specialists) who provide obstetric, surgical, anaesthetic or primary emergency on-call service in rural communities.

"There is also an urgent need for the development of a National Rural Health Policy to combat the lower life expectancy and poorer health outcomes of rural Australians when compared with their city counterparts, and the implementation of a National Rural Health Obligation (in co-operation with the states) to ensure that all

rural Australians have better access to doctors, other health professionals, local hospitals and health services in their communities.

“We desperately hope next week’s Budget will deliver a real way forward for rural healthcare in this country and, importantly, also help improve the overall sustainability of rural communities across Australia.

“We have heard the Rudd Government say on many occasions that rural healthcare desperately needs more support. Now is the time for the Government to put its money where its mouth is.”

**Dr Rischbieth is available for interview on Tuesday afternoon/evening, as well as on Wednesday.  
Media contact: Patrick Daley, RDAA Media Manager, tel: (02) 6273 9303 bh or 0408 004 890.**