

MEDIA RELEASE



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Santa recycling the presents?

Nothing new for small rural towns in After Hours Care Announcement

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) has said there is little to be upbeat about for rural communities in the announcement about after hours care by new Minister for Health, Tanya Plibersek.

“It is a case of more of the same for small rural communities where doctors are already providing care 24 hours a day, seven days a week in hospitals and surgeries,” said RDAA President Dr Paul Mara.

“From 1 July 2013, doctors providing this comprehensive service will have thousands of dollars a year ripped out of their practices when funding from the after hours incentives component in the Practice Incentives Program is diverted to Medicare Locals.

“The government is still ignoring the difficulties of attracting doctors with the training, skills and qualifications to meet the needs of country communities and failing to recognise the rural, regional and metropolitan difference,” Dr Mara said.

“The shortage of after hours services in some areas is a result of a fundamental problem with a shortage of doctors and nurses, and these government initiatives will only make this worse.”

Commenting on the after hours helpline Dr Mara said, “Nurses in these small towns, with local knowledge and knowledge of the patients are already providing a fantastic after hours triage service for their communities.

“The helpline is a good idea for someone who is concerned about a minor illness, but it won’t help much in the bush where most of the patients seen after 9 or 10pm are accidents and emergencies that require hospital management.”

RDAA also has no confidence in Medicare Locals to meet the needs of small rural towns and report that early indications only heighten their fears.

Medicare Locals are failing the crucial tests according to Dr Mara, who raised the following points:

- There is no transparency in negotiations around new after hours services;
- There is a real risk of cost shifting and reduction in hospital services, roles and loss of funding in small communities;

- There is a real risk that services will be regionalised and lost to smaller communities and rural patients forced to travel to major centres to get after hours care;
- There is a real risk that current services where they are working will be adversely affected;
- The proposed industrial arrangements for doctors are totally inadequate and doctors being asked to provide frontline after hours services, will in many cases be reimbursed less than telephone triage doctors on the After Hours GP Helpline.

“The current programs nominated by Medicare Locals are a facade,” said Dr Mara.

“Medicare Locals are not addressing areas with greatest need but simply those that are most politically visible or those that provide an easy, but expensive bureaucratic solution.

“Doctors are dropping out of after hours care in rural areas and there is nothing in these proposals that will change this trend.

“As Divisions of General Practice they have had 20 years to support after hours care and medical workforce in smaller rural communities and have by and large failed, so why should these communities and doctors have any confidence that things will change?

“The Government and Department of Health under Minister Roxon simply failed to listen to the concerns of experienced rural doctors practising at the coal-face and providing comprehensive and continuing services,” Dr Mara said.

“RDAA hopes that it will not be more of the same from Minister Plibersek.”

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