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Doctors urge Independent MPs to insist on rural looking glass

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) is urging the key rural independent MPs to require an incoming Government to introduce formal rural proofing of all proposed health policies and programs.

Rural proofing would require policy-makers to genuinely consider the impact of new policies on rural communities and their existing rural health services, to ensure the policies would work in individual rural settings and would not have detrimental consequences.

Rural proofing for health is mandatory in the United Kingdom, which also has a Commission for Rural Communities.

“The seven million Australians living in rural and remote areas have the worst health outcomes in the nation” RDAA President, Dr Nola Maxfield, said.

“For far too long, health policies and programs have been introduced which cannot be effectively implemented in the bush and which, in many cases, affect the viability of existing rural health services.

“A one-size-fits-all approach to health policy and programs will not address the rural health crisis—what works in one rural community may not necessarily work in the next. Health policy and program development should reflect this.

“Rural proofing aims to ensure that the likely impacts of new health policies and programs are identified and measured before implementation.

“Under a rural proofing regime, all policy-makers would be required to genuinely understand and assess the impact of any health programs and policies on a rural community’s healthcare needs and on existing rural health services.

“This examination through a ‘rural lens’ would provide an opportunity to make adjustments to ensure that the policies and programs are appropriate for individual rural and remote settings.

“Importantly, rural proofing would also ensure that any decision to cut existing services would first take into account the ‘knock on’ effect on rural communities. For example, where a hospital is downgraded or closed by a state government, the impact on the wider community, its businesses and its population, can be devastating.

“Rural proofing would hold governments accountable for rural health delivery and outcomes, particularly if assessments of impact on rural health outcomes are reportable to the public.

“Policy proofing is nothing new. We already have requirements for environmental impact statements, regulatory impact statements and victim impact statements.

“With the rise of the rural independent MPs following last weekend’s federal election, the time is ripe to embed rural proofing in health policy development and health service delivery, and provide a lasting legacy for those living in rural and remote Australia for generations to come.”

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