



Media Release
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Going... Going... GONE. GP exodus threatens rural communities

South Australian rural GPs have held a crisis meeting to decide how best to protect the future of rural hospital services after SA Health's refusal to consider their proposal for contract reform.

The Australian Medical Association South Australia (AMA(SA)) and Rural Doctors Association of South Australia (RDASA) held an online mass meeting of its rural members last night [Wednesday 21 July 2021].

RDASA President, Dr Peter Rischbieth said it was the largest gathering of rural doctors in the history of South Australia, which indicated the magnitude of the problem.

"GPs who also provide care at their hospitals (GP visiting medical officers (VMOs)) – whether it be for inpatient care, emergency, anaesthetics, obstetrics, or surgery – have been offered a renewal of employment contracts that are less favourable than just about any other medical role in the state," Dr Rischbieth said.

"The number of GP VMOs has shrunk dramatically over the past 12 years.

"The continuation of existing arrangements will simply contribute further to the decline of rural health services across South Australia.

"We urgently need a package that fairly values the work rural doctors do in hospitals and to provide emergency and procedural services for our rural communities, and which is attractive to the next generation of rural doctors."

AMA(SA) and RDASA spent months negotiating new contract conditions, and in March recommended to RSS a joint package of reforms that would:

- reduce costly bureaucracy by moving from a complex fee-for-service model to a basic hourly rate
- provide pathways to increase GP involvement in decisions about hospital patient care
- support GPs in the training they provide for medical students, interns and GP trainees
- recognise the skills and contribution GPs provide.

SA Health responded in July 2021 with an offer that was essentially the same as the current employment arrangements, outraging rural doctors across the state.

Doctors who attended last night's meeting unanimously urged AMA(SA) and RDASA to go back to SA Health's Rural Support Service (RSS) and seek a commitment to accept their reform package.

AMA (SA) Vice President, Dr John Williams, said that the number of doctors who attended, and their level of concern for the future of rural health care, clearly showed that a crisis point had been reached.

“The AMA SA and RDASA proposal was designed in consultation with rural doctors to attract and retain GPs and trainee doctors in their communities. The offer also reflected doctors’ commitment to being able to care for their local patients outside their practices, rather than have fly-in, fly-out locums staff the hospitals,” Dr Williams said.

“Rural GP training has been undersubscribed for more than five years, which shows us that young doctors are voting with their feet and are not interested in a medical career in rural South Australia.

“Our offered reforms would help stop GPs leaving and attract a new generation of GP Registrars to train and stay.

“Rural residents who are worried about the future of health services in their region should contact their local Member of Parliament and outline their concerns and experiences,” Dr Williams said.

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