

Media release -- Wednesday 2 July 2008

## Taskforce welcome, but needs wider scope

**The Rural Doctors Association of South Australia (RDASA) says the rural hospitals taskforce announced by SA Health Minister John Hill yesterday is welcome, but it has warned the taskforce must develop a plan to ensure the future sustainability of an appropriate level of services at *all* rural hospitals across the state, including measures to get and keep more doctors, nurses and other health professionals in rural South Australia.**

Minister Hill announced yesterday that 'a new taskforce will be appointed to give advice to the Government on the scope of services to be provided at GP Plus Emergency Hospitals, in particular those hospitals where changes are likely to occur over the ten years of the [SA Country Health Care Plan]'.

The Rural Doctors Association of South Australia has been asked to participate in the taskforce. It will do so, but has emphasised the taskforce must be tasked with developing a plan to ensure the sustainability and growth of the rural health workforce in South Australia and the sustainability of an appropriate level of services at *all* rural hospitals in the state.

The Association has also emphasised that it must be consulted on the terms of reference for the taskforce before they are released.

"The Minister's announcement is an initial welcome sign that he can see the SA Country Health Care Plan in its current state will just not work, both from a cost and community perspective" RDASA President, Dr Steve Holmes, said.

"We are pleased that the Minister has listened to community concern on the future of South Australia's rural hospitals, and put in place a mechanism to consult properly with those at the frontline of rural healthcare—rural health professionals and those living in our rural communities.

"What the new taskforce must now do is undertake the genuine consultation with these stakeholders that should have been undertaken all along. RDASA will work hard as part of the taskforce to ensure this happens. At the end of the day, rural South Australians must be able to access healthcare services in their local communities.

"It is critical this taskforce does not just consider the future of rural hospitals where the Government expects changes are likely to occur over the ten years of the Plan. It must consider the future service profile for *all* rural hospitals across South Australia, and develop a plan to ensure their sustainability into the future and the best way they can maintain an appropriate level of services.

"Part of this work must include the development of an interlocking plan to get and keep more doctors, nurses and other health professionals in rural South Australia. At the end of the day, workforce is the solution not the problem, and it is time the Government approaches its deliberations from this perspective.

"We remain concerned that the Government is simply waiting for the natural attrition of doctors and other health professionals from rural communities so it can downgrade rural hospitals using workforce shortage as an excuse. This will not wash with RDASA or with rural communities.

"We also need to see more exact definitions around exactly what the Government means in its description of rural hospital services in the Plan. For example, by 'emergency services' does the Government mean ongoing acute care fully staffed by local doctors, nurses and paramedics, or does it simply mean a basic first aid post? There's a big difference between the two, and the chance of survival for critically ill or injured rural patients could depend on it. And what does the Plan mean exactly by 'observation beds' and 'holding beds'—these terms are newly devised ones created by the Government, and we need to know exactly what they comprise.

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“Through the taskforce, the SA Government now has the opportunity to undertake proper consultation and plan a sustainable future for rural hospitals and health services in the state, including proper service delineation, adequate IT infrastructure and other linkages, and a sustainable rural health workforce. It will also be critical for the taskforce to take advice from the state’s Clinical Networks about the range of hospital and health services that should be delivered across the state.

“Rural health services in South Australia must never degenerate to being fly-in fly-out services only—the Government must work strenuously to ensure the continuity of rural hospital and health services, and on-the-ground health professionals, across country South Australia well into the future.

“At the federal level, the Rudd Government has already stated that it recognises rural health services are an essential component of wellbeing in rural Australia. It is high time the federal and state governments implement a National Rural Health Obligation to ensure a proper standard of access to local rural hospitals, rural health professionals and rural health services for all country Australians. We hope the rural hospitals taskforce will drive the need for such an Obligation at the state government level.

“At the end of the day, governments have a responsibility to provide local health services in rural communities just as they have a responsibility to provide health services for those living in the cities.

“We look forward to participating in the rural hospitals taskforce to ensure genuine consultation is undertaken with rural clinicians and rural communities on the future of rural hospitals, health services and the rural health workforce in South Australia.”

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