

2022 South Australian Election

Rural Health Policy

Time to invest in a future for rural healthcare in South Australia

The Rural Doctors Association of South Australia (RDASA) is the peak representative body in SA that advocates for rural doctors and the communities in which they work.

Rural communities play a huge role in the economic wellbeing of our state and deserve high quality health services, well maintained health infrastructure, and a well-trained and sustainable rural health workforce.

Many parts of rural South Australia are experiencing what can only be described as a doctor workforce crisis, as more rural doctors choose to leave rural practice in SA and few doctors are being enticed and supported to replace them.

As a result, some towns have been left without a doctor for a significant period of time - in some cases, years - and other towns are relying on increasingly expensive locums to fill the gaps.

RDASA has been vocal on this point for many years and it underpinned the recent and protracted negotiations over rural GP contracts with the Marshall Government.

Addressing the need for additional hospital-based funding for the care of inpatients and emergency patients, and to better support on-call doctors at rural hospitals, is just one area in which the next State Government can help to fix the crisis.

RDASA recently gave evidence to a federal Senate inquiry to highlight the Medicare incentives that might make a career in Rural Medicine more attractive and sustainable to junior doctors and future medical graduates.

There are further policies that RDASA calls on each of SA's political parties and independent candidates to commit to:

1. Funding the Rural Emergency Response Network (RERN)

This important group of emergency responder doctors needs a clear governance and funding commitment from SA Health. Funding of \$100,000 per year is needed to underpin the continuation of statewide first response care. Without this funding, we are at risk of losing a nation-leading program in our state.

2. Funding the SA Rural Generalist Training Pathway

While there has been a lot of talk for many years about establishing a fully-fledged Rural Generalist Training Pathway in SA, there has been no funding commitment from the State Government despite a costed application being provided to SA Health. We are losing junior doctors to other states due to the lack of a funded and clearly defined statewide training program, with no Industrial award currently being negotiated. This is denying training opportunities for SA junior doctors who are passionate about working as a Rural Generalist doctor in rural SA, and many are finding those opportunities in other states.

3. Teaching hospital status for rural hospitals, and a funding commitment for increased rural training

We need to see SA rural hospitals being granted teaching hospital status, and a funding commitment made to support them in providing increased rural training. We need to continue to expand junior doctor training across more rural sites, as well as establish formal training links with SA's metro hospitals.

4. Continuing to fund the South Australian Virtual Emergency Service (SAVES)

We seek a continuation of this 7pm – 7am service for category 3-5 triaged patients. This is an essential service for solo doctor towns in SA.

5. Invest in regional health hubs and infrastructure

We seek a commitment to fund increased radiology services (CT and ultrasound scans) in obstetric, theatre and emergency departments at SA's regional and rural hospitals. This will enable more Rural Generalist doctors to train and work rurally. It will also reduce unnecessary travel to larger centres for some rural patients.

6. Increased role for telehealth

Increasing access to telehealth in our rural health services will reduce the need for rural patients to travel 2-3 hours to Adelaide for 15-minute face-to-face appointments with sub-specialists. Patients can instead be supported by local medical or nursing staff at rural healthcare sites while they attend these consults via telehealth (where medically appropriate).

The forthcoming South Australian Election provides a crucial opportunity for the current SA Government, and the aspiring state government, to create a stable, positive, and sustainable future for rural healthcare in South Australia.

This requires investment in the rural medical workforce, the wider rural health workforce and rural health and hospital infrastructure – but it is an investment that would deliver a sustainable future for rural healthcare in this state, and better health outcomes for rural South Australians.

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