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Plans to work with Pilbara stakeholders following Sonic HealthPlus announcement

The withdrawal of Sonic HealthPlus from two Pilbara communities is a disappointing outcome and reflective of the current fragility of the general practitioner workforce across Australia.

Rural Health West Chief Executive Officer Tim Shackleton said Sonic HealthPlus' departure is a blow to South Hedland and Newman communities.

"The Pilbara is an area of particularly vulnerability for health workforce, experiencing one of the highest turnover rates of GPs and frequent GP shortages.

"At present, we have nine GP vacancies listed across the Pilbara; one of which is based at Sonic HealthPlus in Pannawonica.

"Sonic HealthPlus had not listed any vacancies with Rural Health West in South Hedland or Newman, so we are surprised about the decision to close those practices."

Tim said that despite the ongoing challenge presented by the Pilbara, Rural Health West does have success in recruiting to the region.

"In the past 12 months, we have recruited six GPs to Roebourne, Karratha, South Hedland and Port Hedland; as well as 17 other health professionals.

"We've also provided 875 days of GP locum support to the region.

"So we are disappointed to hear the closure decision was made without being offered the opportunity to work with Sonic HealthPlus to find alternate solutions."

Rural Health West GP data shows there are 30 medical practitioners engaged in primary health care across Newman, Port Hedland and South Hedland; 17 of whom work for WA Country Health Service at Hedland Health Campus and four working in Aboriginal health.

"The proportion of general practitioners working as employees with the hospital and Aboriginal health sectors versus private practice in the Pilbara demonstrates the fragility of private general practice in these towns.

"While some Pilbara postcodes enjoy the highest average earnings in the nation, this has not translated to a thriving and sustainable general practice sector.

“The most recent Federal budget promises some modest measures that will bolster rural practice viability; however more needs to be done to fundamentally address the sustainability of primary care in rural and remote locations.”

The closure of Sonic HealthPlus in South Hedland will see the community lose three GPs; while the Newman clinic closure will see the loss of four GPs.

Tim said Rural Health West is arranging discussions with local government and practices.

“Our team is reaching out to local stakeholders to identify solutions to retain the displaced GPs, so that the community can continue to access GP services.

“Rural Health West is committed to supporting the Pilbara region and has a history of developing bespoke solutions for rural communities in need.”

Previously, Rural Health West has been behind programs such as the Pilbara Health Services Collaborative Project, the Forward to Fellowship Program which supported overseas trained doctors in the Pilbara to achieve vocational registration and the Pilbara Health Professionals Network.

The Pilbara Health Professionals Network, which was launched in April 2020 by Rural Health West in collaboration with WA Country Health Service, The Rural Clinical School of WA, WA Centre for Rural Health and WA Primary Health Alliance, has been a particular success story, boasting 500 members.

The Network provides upskilling and networking opportunities for health professionals in the region, with the aim of boosting retention of existing health professionals by building collaborative relationships and reducing barriers they may experience while working in remote locations.

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Rural Health West aims to improve access to quality healthcare for rural communities through the provision of a highly skilled, motivated and sustainable medical and allied health workforce. We are a not-for-profit organisation primarily funded through the WA Country Health Service and the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care.