

2 August 2023

Survey reveals increase in rural and remote GPs but inequitable distribution remains a challenge

Western Australia's most comprehensive survey of rural and remote General Practitioners (GPs) has recorded a more than two per cent increase in the total number of doctors during 2022.

Rural Health West's annual GP survey recorded a total of 911 GPs working in rural and remote communities at the end of November 2022, compared with 891 in 2021.

Results of the annual survey were this week published in the [Rural General Practice in Western Australia – Annual Workforce Update 2022](#).

The most significant increase in GP numbers was fly-in fly-out and drive-in drive-out GPs, with an additional 15 doctors commencing during the 12-month period.

Rural Health West Chief Executive Officer Tim Shackleton said the survey was based on the most comprehensive database of rural GPs working in regional and remote Western Australia. Rural Health West is WA's sole primary healthcare workforce agency.

Mr Shackleton said that while the increase in overall numbers was welcomed, there remained an uneven distribution of doctors across the State's seven health regions.

He said the South West was the most populous region with 300 GPs, or nearly 33 per cent of the State's total rural GP workforce.

"One of the great challenges in recruiting and retaining GPs in rural and remote communities is the inequitable distribution of doctors across the State, which this year's data continues to highlight," Mr Shackleton said.

"While any increase in numbers is always welcome, our data shows that vacancies for GPs in rural and remote communities continue to outstrip supply and that this is having an impact on the ability of people in some rural and remote areas to access medical care."

Mr Shackleton said that there were currently 88 GP vacancies across country WA listed with Rural Health West - of which 33 were classified as high priority – a

trend that has remained relatively consistent over the past five years. A high priority vacancy is where a community's access to a GP is at risk if a doctor leaves the community.

Several regions experienced a growth in GP numbers. The South West gained 18 GPs (6.4 per cent growth); the Midwest gained four GPs (4.4 per cent) and the Kimberley gained three GPs (2.7 per cent).

Mr Shackleton said these increases were offset by reductions in GP numbers in regions that are among some of the State's most disadvantaged.

Losses included the 10 GPs in the Wheatbelt region (six additional GPs have commenced since the survey census date), three in the Goldfields which two GPs in the Pilbara and one GP in the Indian Ocean Territories.

"What we also saw was 113 GPs departing the rural and remote workforce, with more than 30 per cent of those returning to live and work in Perth," he said.

"We also recorded the highest number of retiring doctors, with 21 GPs or 18.6 per cent of all departures from rural and remote communities deciding to retire from medical practise. This is the highest number in Rural Health West's 30-year history."

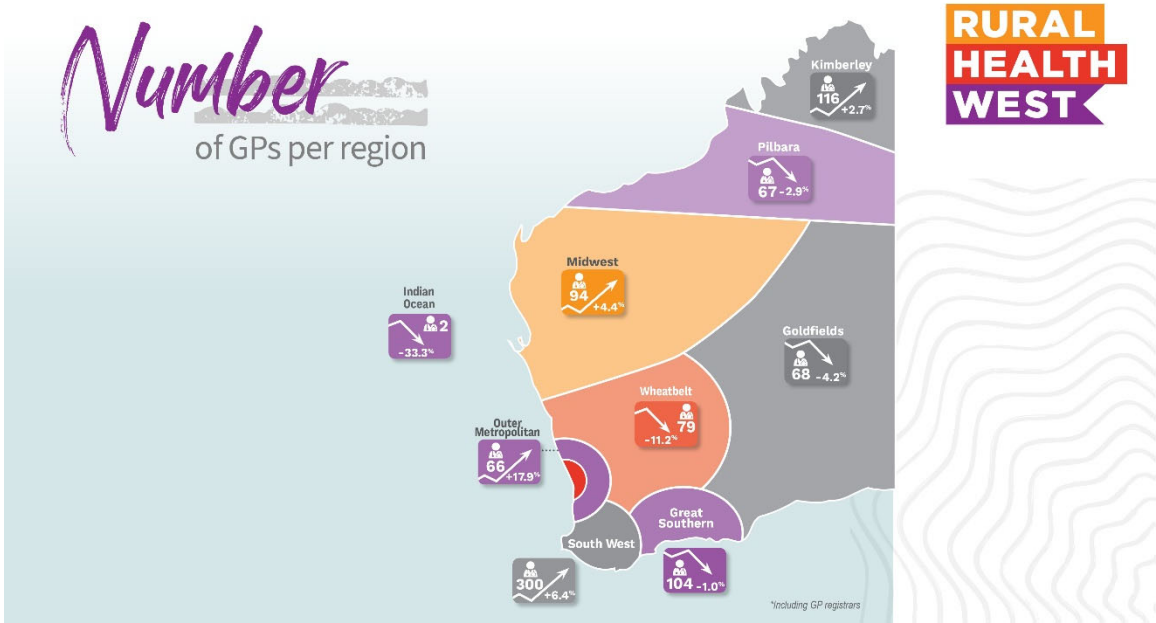
Mr Shackleton said one of the more positive trends from the survey was a reversal in the decline in GPs arriving from overseas, which had decreased annually from 2017 to 2020.

"Over the reporting period, 69 (56 per cent) of the 122 GPs who joined the permanent workforce were international medical graduates, who continue to be integral to the rural and remote workforce.

ENDS

See over (and attached) map of GP numbers per region.

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.



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