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Number of rural GPs in WA surpasses 1000 for the first time

A record number of general practitioners are working across rural and remote WA, surpassing the 1,000 GP mark for the first time.

The milestone, recorded in Rural Health West's latest rural GP workforce report, highlights the growth in GPs in many locations; an essential step toward improving access to primary healthcare, reducing health inequities, and delivering better outcomes for rural patients.

As of 30 November 2024, 1009 GPs were recorded as practising in rural WA (Modified Monash Model 2–7), marking a 5.8 per cent increase from the previous year.

The most significant gains were seen in resident GPs, with an additional 38 doctors, and GP registrars, with an increase of 13. The proportion of female GPs also rose to 48 per cent, continuing a trend observed since 2014 when it was 28 per cent.

Rural Health West Chief Executive Officer Professor Catherine Elliott said the results were both encouraging and a reminder of the ongoing effort required to attract and retain a strong rural GP workforce.

“To have more than 1,000 rural GPs practising in Western Australia for the first time is a major milestone,” Prof Elliott said.

“However, we also know that rural and remote communities are continuing to grow, and demand for care is increasing.

“The 2024 WA Rural GP Summit identified that we’ll need at least 300 more rural GPs by 2030 so while this is a great step forward, we still have a way to go.

Five regions the South West, Great Southern, Outer Metropolitan, Pilbara and Midwest saw a rise in GP numbers.

Turnover in the permanent GP workforce also showed signs of improvement, dropping to 12.5 per cent, down from 14.7 per cent the year before.

“While turnover remains a challenge, particularly in remote regions like the Pilbara and Kimberley, we hope this signals a growing trend of stability,” Prof Elliott said.

The report also highlighted the ongoing importance of International Medical Graduates (IMGs), who made up 67.5 per cent of new arrivals and represent more than half (53.5 per cent) of the rural GP workforce.

“International Medical Graduates are a crucial part of the rural health landscape,” Prof Elliott said.

As the rural GP workforce continues to grow, Professor Elliott noted the importance of ensuring those doctors were well-supported in their roles.

“Building a strong workforce isn’t just about numbers, it’s also about making sure rural GPs have the professional support they need,” she said.

“That includes access to communities of practice, peer connection, and the latest evidence-based trends so they can deliver the highest standard of care and stay supported throughout their careers in the bush.”

Rural Health West’s annual workforce report is used by health services, government, education and training providers, and regional development stakeholders to inform workforce planning and policy.

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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, Disability and Ageing.