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Addressing the GP shortage in rural Western Australia

The recent ABC article ['GP shortage contributing to 'bidding war' as regional towns struggle to attract doctors'](#) highlighting the growing GP shortage across Australia, particularly in rural and remote areas, reflects challenges we are experiencing firsthand in Western Australia (WA).

Many rural communities facing an increasing struggle to attract and retain GPs. However, Rural Health West is committed to addressing this issue, both through direct action and engagement across the sector, as well as advocating for reforms to improve the attractiveness of rural medicine.

There are currently 1,050 GPs known to be working across rural Western Australia, however it is projected we will need 200 additional GPs by 2030 to meet population growth and healthcare needs.

There are presently 82 GP vacancies listed with Rural Health West, 25 of which are deemed to be high priority vacancies, which represent potentially limited access to primary care services for people in those communities. There is much work that needs to be done to ensure we don't just maintain current levels of access to primary care, but improve and expand access in line with growing need.

The wicked challenge of attracting and retaining GPs across rural WA was at the heart of the WA Rural GP Summit convened by Rural Health West in March 2024.

Through the Summit process, stakeholders and GPs identified key initiatives to address GP shortages across the entire career pipeline.

The Summit process identified priority areas of advocacy for Rural Health West, including:

- Strengthened rural GP training pathways: Expanding rural placements and supporting rural-focused medical schools and training programs.
- Integrated community support: Facilitating cultural and social integration for IMGs and other rural GPs to improve retention.
- Policy reforms to support small communities: This includes reallocating state and federal funding to ensure equitable access to healthcare across WA.
- Enhanced financial incentives for rural practice, including subsidies for housing and professional development.

Further, Rural Health West is acutely aware that many small, inland local governments are funding primary healthcare services, often outside their remit and at a significant financial strain.

Research undertaken by Rural Health West and WA Local Government Association determined that 48 local governments provide either in-kind or financial support to local general practices at a total net value of \$5.2 million annually.

The vast majority of this expenditure is from communities with fewer than 5,000 residents, primarily in the Wheatbelt, Midwest, and Great Southern regions.

To address these inequities, Rural Health West has proposed a Local Government Primary Healthcare Support Program, which includes:

- Best practice guidelines for local governments to attract and retain GPs effectively.
- Tailored advice for communities facing unique challenges.
- A reimbursement fund for local governments that adhere to best practices, easing financial strain and ensuring sustainability.

We believe the program will help improve practice viability, thereby enhancing their attractiveness to providers and reduce the burden on local ratepayers.

Further, a transparent reimbursement scheme for local governments supporting general practices in areas of market failure, will ensure communities are not disadvantaged through reduced access to frontline healthcare.

We have recently presented a proposal to the WA Minister for Health, The Honourable Amber-Jade Sanderson seeking support to implement the Local Government Primary Healthcare Support Program, alongside seeking funding to expand the Regional Health Professionals Network program, which is an important retention strategy, as well as increasing support activities for IMG doctors to assist them to better integrate into their new host communities.

We call on policymakers, health organisations, and community leaders to support these initiatives and ensure all Western Australians have access to quality healthcare, regardless of their location.

ENDS

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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.