

24 February 2025

Minister Butler's announcement welcomed, but more needs to be done

Rural Health West welcomes the recognition of the Rural Generalist specialty and the record number of medical graduates choosing general practice as announced by Minister Butler on 13 February 2025. These are positive steps towards addressing workforce shortages and improving healthcare access in rural and remote communities.

However, despite these advancements, there remains a significant shortfall in GP numbers across rural Western Australia.

Currently, there are 78 GP vacancies registered with Rural Health West across rural WA, with 22 of these identified as high-priority vacancies. This indicates there are a number of communities across rural WA who may have limited access to vital primary care services.

Projections undertaken in 2024 by Rural Health West indicate that an additional 300 GPs will be needed by 2030 to meet growing demand, account for retirements, and address the current shortfall in GP numbers.

To truly redress this issue, further targeted interventions must be considered and actioned.

At the WA Rural GP Summit convened by Rural Health West in March 2024, rural GPs and key stakeholders identified the following ten priority areas for reform:

1. Strengthen generalism in medical education and training – Ensure that generalist principles are deeply embedded into medical school and postgraduate curricula, pedagogy, and assessment.
2. Expand support for International Medical Graduates (IMGs) – Provide financial, social, and professional support programs to assist IMGs in transitioning to and remaining in rural practice.
3. Increase rural practice capacity for student placements – Support rural GP practices to host medical students, fostering early exposure to rural general practice.
4. Improve working conditions for GP registrars – Ensure meaningful access to leave entitlements to promote retention and well-being.
5. Target financial incentives more effectively – Align incentive structures with town demographics to better attract GPs to areas of greatest need.
6. Promote general practice as the 'go-to' career choice – Market general practice to medical students and junior doctors, highlighting the career's variety and opportunities.

7. Expand rural placements for junior doctors – Scale up intern and junior doctor positions in primary care and rural settings to build early exposure to rural general practice.
8. Improve hospital-GP communication pathways – Streamline processes for escalating GP queries and concerns within the hospital system to enhance collaboration and patient care.
9. Support skills maintenance and career progression – Establish a pathway for GPs to upgrade and maintain advanced and procedural skills required for rural general practice.
10. Develop FIFO/DIDO-based GP servicing models – Explore fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) or drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) models to support persistently hard-to-serve rural and remote locations.

In addition to these priorities, Medicare reform remains essential to ensuring rural general practice is not only sustainable but an attractive career choice. Medicare must be reviewed to better reflect the complexity of rural practice, and alternative funding mechanisms should be considered as part of long-term reform solutions.

While these latest developments signal progress, much more needs to be done to ensure rural communities in WA have consistent access to high-quality general practice services. Rural Health West remains committed to working with stakeholders to advance these priorities and secure a sustainable future for rural general practice.

Quote attributable to Rural Health West CEO, Professor Catherine Elliott:

"The recognition of the Rural Generalist specialty and record numbers of medical graduates choosing general practice are positive steps forward. However, rural Western Australia still faces a significant GP workforce shortage, with 78 vacancies registered with Rural Health West – including 22 high-priority positions. Projections indicate we will need an additional 300 GPs by 2030 to meet growing demand and replace retiring doctors. Without further intervention, many rural communities will struggle with access to essential healthcare services."

"The WA Rural GP Summit, convened by Rural Health West in March 2024, identified key priorities to strengthen rural general practice. These include expanding support for International Medical Graduates, increasing rural training placements, improving financial incentives, and creating clearer pathways for GPs to maintain advanced skills."

"Medicare reform is crucial to ensuring rural general practice is not only sustainable but also a financially viable and attractive career choice. Targeted incentives and alternative funding models will be vital to addressing these challenges. Rural Health West remains committed to advocating for these solutions to secure a strong and stable GP workforce for rural WA."

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