

5 May 2025

Rural Health West CEO visits Pilbara to connect with local health workforce

New Rural Health West Chief Executive Officer Professor Catherine Elliott has this week completed a regional visit to Karratha, meeting with health professionals, service providers and community leaders to hear firsthand about the opportunities and challenges facing the region's health workforce.

Invited by Deputy Chair of the Rural Health West Board, David Rigby – co-founder of Pilbara Therapy Services – Catherine presented to the organisation's team and engaged with a range of local health stakeholders, including the Pilbara Kimberley University Centres, Connect Paediatric Therapy Services, Mawarnkarra Health Service, and the City of Karratha. She also attended the Pilbara Aboriginal Health Planning Forum.

"The Pilbara is an incredibly important part of Western Australia. While it has its challenges, there is also enormous potential – and a strong local health workforce doing exceptional work to keep communities healthy," Catherine said.

"This visit was about listening – learning more about what's working, what's not, and how Rural Health West can better support and collaborate with local health professionals."

Catherine acknowledged the leadership and dedication of many health professionals across the region.

"This region has been a training ground for many outstanding health leaders over the years – that's a reflection of the passion, resilience and leadership that exists right across the Pilbara health workforce," said Catherine.

"There are some truly amazing people doing incredible things here. While I didn't get the chance to meet everyone this time, it was so exciting to hear their stories and see the impact they're making on the ground."

At the recent WA Rural Health Excellence Awards, David and Hayley Rigby – co-founders of Pilbara Therapy Services – were jointly recognised as Clinical Leaders of the Year, while Sharon Lockyer of WA Country Health Service – Pilbara was awarded Aboriginal Health Professional of the Year.

While Award finalist Shaylee Mills from Pharmacy 777 in Karratha is inspiring the next generation through her The Rural Pharmacist social media platform.

The visit comes at a time of significant workforce need, with current vacancies in the Pilbara including six general practitioner roles and 18 nursing, midwifery, dental and allied health positions.

The region has one of the highest turnover rates for GPs in the State, with a heavy reliance on fly-in, fly-out and overseas-trained doctors.

Rural Health West is actively investing in local workforce development through several key initiatives:

- Health Workforce Scholarship Program (HWSP) – more than \$284,000 in professional development grants have been provided to 115 Pilbara-based clinicians so far this financial year, enabling access to training and upskilling to expand the range of health services available for Pilbara communities close to home.
- Outreach Services – 499 visits valued at \$1.78 million have been delivered across the Pilbara this financial year, increasing access to services for regional communities.
- Workforce – delivered 883 days of locum GP coverage in the region to help fill urgent workforce gaps, while also recruiting three GPs and 20 allied health professionals to the region.

The region boasts one of the most active Health Professionals Networks (HPNs) in the State, with more than 840 members and 14 education and networking events already delivered this year.

Events have taken place across the region and covered a wide range of clinical and community health topics, including diabetes, chronic disease management, chronic wet cough, paediatric RHD, wound care, and cancer.

“We’re committed to improving the attraction, retention and support of health professionals in the Pilbara – and we’re proud to be working with others who share that goal,” Catherine said.

ENDS

Media enquiries:

Belinda Cipriano - 08 6389 4500

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.