

Rural GP workforce continues to grow, but more support needed for international doctors and procedural GPs

Western Australia has recorded a 4.7 per cent increase in the number of rural GPs, according to the *Rural General Practice in Western Australia – Annual Workforce Update 2023* published by Rural Health West this week.

The update recorded a total of 954 GPs working in rural and remote communities at the end of November 2023, compared with 911 in November 2022.

All regions, bar the Great Southern and Goldfields regions experienced an increase in GP numbers, with the South West and Wheatbelt regions recording the highest rates of 7.7 per cent and 7.6 per cent respectively.

Between November 2022 and November 2023, 155 GPs joined the workforce, marking the highest number of arrivals in the past decade.

Among these arrivals, 58.1 per cent obtained their initial medical qualifications overseas demonstrating the significant contribution International Medical Graduates (IMGs) play in providing primary care to rural WA communities.

“Overseas trained doctors continue to be incredibly important for the health and well-being of our country communities.”

“In the 2023-2024 financial year, Rural Health West recruited 53 GPs to country locations, of which 48 were IMGs.

“However, it is critically important that IMGs are supported long-term, so that they can become ensconced into their new homes and become a permanent member of the community.”

Between November 2022 and November 2023, 114 GPs departed the rural and remote workforce with 42.1 per cent of those leaving for the Perth metropolitan area. Of those departing, nearly 60 per cent were IMGs.

Increasing support systems for IMGs was one of the key issues identified at the WA Rural GP Summit, hosted by Rural Health West in March 2024.

The Summit brought together a range of health stakeholders from across Australia, as well as rural GPs, to develop action plans to progress key interventions that can improve rural general practice across Western Australia.

“IMG support was one of the top ten issues identified, and Rural Health West has developed a comprehensive support program that will ensure doctors from overseas receive an extensive clinical orientation, cultural training and individualised help and guidance on how best to settle into their new environment.”

“We will be asking the WA State Government for financial support to assist in implementing this program, which we believe will assist in reducing the departure of IMGs to the metropolitan area once they complete their mandatory programs.”

Impacts for community health will also be felt by declining number of GP proceduralists, which has continued to fall for the third consecutive year.

At the census date of November 2023, there were 176 rural GP proceduralists compared to 181 at November 2022.

Greater support for GP proceduralists was another key intervention noted at the Summit.

“Presently, there is significant demand for procedural upskilling and skills refresher opportunities from rural GP proceduralists.

“These opportunities are solely located in metropolitan hospitals, which means time away from home and work for rural GPs.

“The limited number of places for clinical attachments and training also means that GP proceduralists must ‘compete’ for space on these programs against metropolitan-based specialist trainees.”

Rural Health West is also working to address this issue in collaboration with the WA Department of Health Office of the Chief Medical Officer.

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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.