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Paid placement expansion a major investment in Australia's future health workforce

Rural Health West has welcomed the Australian Government's expansion of the Commonwealth Prac Payment to students across a broader range of allied health disciplines, describing it as an important investment in Australia's future health workforce.

The expansion will provide eligible students studying clinical psychology, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech pathology, paramedicine, radiography, pharmacy, rehabilitation therapies, audiology and podiatry with financial support while completing mandatory placements.

Rural Health West Chief Executive Officer Professor Catherine Elliott said the announcement was a significant and very welcome step towards addressing placement poverty and removing barriers for students entering critical health professions.

"This is an outstanding announcement for students, for the health sector and ultimately for the communities that rely on these professions," Catherine said.

"Rural Health West has been calling for greater recognition of placement poverty because we see its impact firsthand. Every week, we hear from students who want to undertake rural placements but are struggling with the cost of accommodation, travel and living away from home, often while also losing the income they rely on.

"Expanding the Commonwealth Prac Payment to these health disciplines will make an enormous difference."

Catherine said Rural Health West hoped the expansion could be the foundation for further reform, including consideration of additional support for students undertaking placements in rural and remote communities, where the costs can be considerably higher.

For rural students in particular, undertaking a rural placement does not necessarily mean returning home. Many have already relocated to study and may need to relocate again for placement, sometimes hundreds of kilometres from both their university and their family home.

“Rural placements are one of the most powerful opportunities we have to build the future rural health workforce,” Catherine said.

“We know that rural exposure during training can influence where health professionals ultimately choose to practise, and that students from rural backgrounds are particularly likely to return to rural communities.

“But rural placements often come with additional costs – long-distance travel, temporary accommodation and, in many cases, the cost of maintaining a home elsewhere.

“We would love to see the Commonwealth Prac Payment continue to evolve, with consideration given to additional or scaled support for students facing the greatest costs, particularly those from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds and those choosing to undertake placements in rural and remote communities.

Catherine hoped that scheme might also be extended to support medical students.

“There can sometimes be a perception that medical students come from privileged backgrounds, but that does not reflect the reality for many students today.

“Many are completing medicine as a postgraduate degree. They may be living independently, supporting families and managing the same cost-of-living pressures as students in other disciplines. Medicine is an intensive course of study, with clinical placements a fundamental component of the degree.

“While Australia may not have a shortage of people wanting to study medicine, we do have significant challenges in ensuring our future medical workforce is distributed to the communities that need it most. Supporting students to experience rural practice is an important part of addressing that challenge.”

“Today’s announcement is a major step forward. With further measures that recognise the additional cost of rural training, we have an opportunity to not only tackle placement poverty, but to use this investment strategically to help build the health workforce Australia’s rural communities need for the future.”

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