



**The Hon Mark Coulton MP**  
Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications and Local Government



**The Hon Brad Hazzard MP**  
Minister for Health and Medical Research

# Joint Communique

Bilateral Regional Health Forum

5 November 2020, Dubbo

The second Bilateral Regional Health Forum between representatives of the Australian and New South Wales Governments was held in Dubbo NSW. The Forum was conducted in a COVID-safe manner, with participants presenting both in-person and via virtual link.

Federal Minister for Regional Health, Hon Mark Coulton MP, and New South Wales Minister for Health and Medical Research, Hon Brad Hazzard MP co-chaired the Forum. Other notable attendees included Senator Perin Davey, NSW Minister for Mental Health, Youth Health and Women, the Hon. Bronnie Taylor, and State Member for Dubbo, Mr Dugald Saunders MP.

The Forum brought together representatives of both Commonwealth and State Government with key local health stakeholders to showcase rural health policy and facilitate collaboration to deliver better outcomes for regional, rural, and remote communities. The forum focused on joint policy approaches for mental health, workforce planning, virtual care, and primary care reform.

## **Update from Ministers and key outcomes**

Ministers Coulton and Hazzard highlighted the significant Commonwealth and State Government investments in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and addressing rural workforce challenges. The success of regional communities in avoiding major COVID-19 outbreaks was acknowledged and the hard work of rural health workers and co-operation of communities recognised.

Commonwealth and NSW representatives agreed to:

- Progress the National Medical Workforce Strategy, including data sharing to improve collaborative workforce planning.
- Work together to provide the HeADS UPP tool to NSW Local Health Districts.
- Continue to progress innovative models of care trials across Western and Southern NSW sites, with a focus on identifying further opportunities for such tailored, local approaches to improve services in rural communities.
- Monitor the progress of the single employer model being trialled in the Murrumbidgee, which aims to make rural generalist training more attractive.
- Continued implementation of the National Rural Generalist Pathway to grow and support this critical workforce:

- NSW will continue to work with the Commonwealth in supporting the NSW Rural Generalist Coordination Unit, which assists rural generalist registrars to navigate the training pathway, and
- Both Governments support General Practice Colleges undertaking work to make the case for recognition of rural generalist medicine as a specialty within the field of General Practice, noting this will be independently assessed by the Medical Board of Australia and Australian Medical Council.
- Focus on growing the generalist workforce and supporting full scope of practice, including:
  - Identifying opportunities to support rural generalism in nursing and allied health professions; and
  - Promoting more generalist specialist roles through the National Medical Workforce Strategy.
- Extend rural student placements, including into more remote communities, through the Murray Darling Medical School Network and Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training Program:
  - The Commonwealth will implement funding provided through the 2020 Federal Budget to increase placements for allied health and nursing students in aged care and in remote settings.
- Jointly investigate approaches for working with the sector to develop quality standards for virtual care/telehealth.

#### **National Rural Health Commissioner update**

Professor Ruth Stewart gave an update on her work as the Commissioner. The Office of the National Rural Health Commissioner is an integral part of the Australian Government's agenda to increase access to services and ensure a strong focus on the health needs of rural communities.

Professor Stewart reported that the Office will soon include Deputy Commissioners, who will provide expert advice across a range of vital rural health disciplines including indigenous health, nursing, and allied health. One of the Office's early priorities is to advise on the roll out of the National Rural Generalist Pathway in medicine and allied health.

Professor Stewart reported the Office will also have a role designing a Commonwealth grant opportunity for innovative models of care in rural and remote communities. She also discussed how rural and remote communities may benefit from a single funding stream contributed to by Commonwealth and State governments.

#### **Building Resilience in Regional Communities**

Minister Taylor facilitated a session focused on how NSW Health is monitoring several key mental health indicators to identify and respond to the compounding impacts of drought, bushfires, and the pandemic.

The Commonwealth highlighted a record funding commitment to address mental health issues across the country, including regional NSW. The estimated Health Portfolio expenditure for mental health services and suicide prevention has reached \$5.7b for 2020-21. Since March 2020, the Commonwealth has made available more than \$500m in funding direct supports to respond to the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Western NSW Local Health District shared their innovative *Mental Health in the Home* initiative, which has helped adapt to the impacts of the pandemic.

Key NSW Government initiatives include:

- employment of 25 new Bushfire Recovery Mental Health Clinicians across NSW, with another five to come;
- A commitment of \$80 million to support mental wellness and boost mental health services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes expansion of virtual mental health services for front line medical and emergency staff;
- A further \$87 million is being invested over three years for 15 new initiatives under the Towards Zero Suicides Premier's Priority.

The Rural NSW General Practice and Primary Healthcare Natural Disaster and Emergency Partnership Group has brought together 35 health service and workforce agencies, along with Primary Health Networks, Local Health Districts, NSW Health and Department of Health to coordinate activities supporting rural workforce and report in March 2021 on learnings from the natural disaster and emergency period.

The Forum highlighted the importance of self-care and mental health support for rural health professionals, many of whom have limited opportunities for rest and relief while supporting their communities through hardship. The *Rural Health Together* initiative from the NSW Rural Doctors Network (<https://ruralhealthtogether.info/>) aggregates mental health and well-being services for health professionals and has been developed in partnership with funded programs.

Attendees provided valuable feedback to Ministers Coulton, Hazzard, and Taylor on solutions for creating sustainable healthcare models that build community resilience. These included ensuring front line workers are adequately supported to reduce workforce fatigue, expanding rural generalist models to extend the scope of practice of health professionals and utilising team based care.

### **Share and Scale Successful Regional Workforce and Service Initiatives**

Ministers Coulton and Hazzard co-chaired an informative session on successful regional workforce initiatives.

The Western NSW Health Collaboration provided detail of its role testing a series of new models of care in five Western and Southern NSW locations over an initial 18 month period.

The Forum highlighted one of the trial sites – the 4Ts of Tottenham, Tullamore, Trangie and Trundle – where four closely connected communities will trial a shared health workforce supported by telehealth to provide continuity of care. Both Ministers praised the Western NSW Collaboration's community-led approach that brought together communities, local health professionals, and all tiers of government to develop local solutions to local challenges.

Commonwealth representatives highlighted ongoing collaboration with NSW through the National Medical Workforce Strategy. The Strategy was discussed as one of the key mechanisms to guide long term collaborative workforce planning across Australia, and will identify practical actions to build a sustainable, highly trained medical workforce. The Strategy will be a key driver of reform and will focus on priority areas, collaborating on planning and design of the medical workforce, reforming the training pathway, building generalist capability, and enabling a responsive and flexible medical workforce.

The Commonwealth outlined the capability of the HeadS UPP Tool - a workforce planning and analysis tool that utilises a new integrated source of health workforce and services data. HeadS UPP is a revolutionary approach to data integration and will be available to a variety of government and non-government organisations involved in health workforce planning. Both Commonwealth and NSW Governments are committed to sharing data to strengthen the tools effectiveness.

NSW Health's Deputy Secretary, Health System Strategy and Planning, Dr Nigel Lyons, facilitated a panel session on how virtual care supports sustainable rural healthcare models including allied health and smaller rural hospitals. Panel members included Peter Harris, a community member from Western NSW; Dr Shannon Nott, a clinician from Western NSW Local Health District and NSW Health clinical lead on virtual care; Ruth Stewart, National Rural Health Commissioner; Richard Colbran, Chief Executive Officer of the NSW Rural Doctors Network and Jill Ludford, Chief Executive of Murrumbidgee Local Health District. A key message from the panel was that virtual care is not a replacement for face-to-face care or local health care providers. Virtual care facilitates the provision of high-quality care closer to home using technology, connecting patients, carers, and families with local and specialist clinicians. Virtual care can also play a valuable role in supporting local health care workers in regional and rural areas. The need for better communication to help communities understand the benefits virtual care can offer was highlighted.

Representatives from Primary Health Networks, Local Health Districts, and the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health sector, the Rural Doctors Association of Australia, the National Rural Health Commissioner, and senior leaders in the Commonwealth Department of Health and NSW Ministry of Health participated in the Forum.

The Bilateral Regional Health Forum is held twice a year to discuss important health issues affecting communities across regional rural, and remote NSW. It represents a strong collaboration between Commonwealth and NSW Governments to partner on meaningful responses to challenges experienced by regional New South Welshmen.