



## **DRIVE TO IMPROVE HEALTH SERVICES FOR RURAL AUSTRALIA WELCOMED**

23 June 2020 – The peak body for Australia’s University Departments of Rural Health (UDRH) today welcomed Federal Government initiatives to drive further improvements in vital health care services for people living in rural and remote communities.

The government announced in mid-June that the office of the National Rural Health Commissioner (RHC), initially established for a limited period in 2017, will now continue and be expanded to take a broader approach to delivering health service reforms for these communities which face ongoing health professional shortages.

Regional Health Minister Mark Coulton has indicated that two new deputy rural health commissioners will be appointed to assist the RHC going forward. They will provide expertise across issues including Indigenous health and approaches to increase the supply of nursing and allied health professionals living and working in rural and remote locations.

ARHEN also welcomed the retiring Rural Health Commissioner’s report into improving access, quality and distribution of allied health care in rural and remote Australia, released last week after extensive consultations. The report makes four key recommendations:

- Establishment of Service and Learning Consortia to improve access to allied health services
- Investing in a culturally safe and culturally responsive workforce to increase participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the allied health workforce
- Investing in allied health data and infrastructure to inform and improve the design and development of rural and remote allied health workforce planning and policy
- Appointment of a National Chief Allied Health Officer to provide leadership and representation within the Australian Government.

The RHC’s report was presented to a special meeting of the Rural Health Roundtable, convened by Minister Coulton and attended by ARHEN. ARHEN looks forward to working with government and other agencies in responding to the far-reaching recommendations in the report.

The recommendations offer a realistic, achievable pathway to address longstanding issues that mean people who live rurally face considerably worse health outcomes than those in cities whose access to health care services is so much better.

ARHEN agrees with the RHC, Prof Paul Worley, that postcodes should not determine health prognosis. We look forward to the government’s swift response and will work collaboratively with all stakeholders to progress these important measures to make regional Australia a better place to work, live and raise a family.

ARHEN thanked Prof Worley, who is stepping down at the end of June, for his vision in developing the report, for his commitment to improving health care in rural Australia and especially for his attention to the allied health workforce which has been neglected for so long.

A new RHC is expected to be announced in July.

UDRH Directors and Minister Coulton will discuss the RHC report at the next ARHEN Board meeting in September. Also under the spotlight will be the findings of a recently completed evaluation of the Rural Health Multidisciplinary Program, the funding basis for UDRHs.

ARHEN represents the 16 UDRHs located in rural and remote areas in all states and the NT. UDRHs support nursing and allied health students to undertake clinical training in these locations so they experience the professional and lifestyle opportunities that exist outside capital cities.

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