

27 MAY 2019

Access to services is top issue for Hunt: NRHA

Australia's peak body for rural, regional and remote health says boosting access to health services via telehealth and increased broadband connectivity, plus boosting the allied health workforce in those areas are key priorities for Australia's re-appointed Health Minister Greg Hunt.

The National Rural Health Alliance welcomed Mr Hunt's re-appointment in the portfolio saying he was well briefed on what's needed to improve the lives of the more than seven million people living outside metropolitan cities.

"Mr Hunt has a head start in the portfolio," NRHA CEO Mark Diamond said.

"He knows access to health services is the critical issue for people in remote, regional and rural Australia," Mr Diamond said

"We especially look forward to working with the Minister on the Coalition's pre-election commitment to deliver more than 3000 additional nurses and allied health professionals into rural general practice as part of its Stronger Rural Health Strategy," he said.

"In the previous government, Mr Hunt took a strong interest in expanding new technologies such as tele-health and mobile-based health applications which we welcomed and the NRHA is very keen to continue to work with the Federal Government to achieve this."

Mr Diamond said Mr Hunt had been a strong advocate for reducing financial impacts on medication-reliant people and for increasing mental health care, especially in remote and Indigenous communities which are now facing a youth suicide epidemic and he welcomed the Government's commitment to addressing these issues.

"We also know that Mr Hunt is very much aware that Australia's health system is considered second best in the world by international standards and the only thing that's holding it back from being number one is the lack of equitable access to health care right across the nation.

"A large chunk of that inequity he acknowledges is because people in rural and remote Australia experience real difficulties in accessing healthcare every day of the week.

The National Rural Health Alliance is Australia's peak non-government organisation for rural and remote health.

“We need a focus on making sure that the first principle in Australia’s Charter of Healthcare Rights applies to all Australians – including the 7 million people living outside our capital cities. That right says everyone has the right to access services to address their healthcare needs.”

An NRHA Ministerial briefing before the election sought the Government’s commitment to extend its Stronger Rural Health Strategy by targeting additional allied health positions for the bush, expanding telehealth and addressing broadband connectivity issues in remote communities.

Mr Diamond said Mr Hunt had been excited about a proposal to explore best workforce models for rural areas and the NRHA was very committed to advancing that proposal with him.

“We want to identify up to 20 demonstration sites across the nation where the NRHA would work with local providers, Primary Health Networks, Local Health Districts, the non-government and private sector to develop sustainable workforce and service models that will increase access to health care.” Mr Diamond said.

“We are confident that for a relatively small outlay of \$50m we could make some real inroads in improving health outcomes for those communities. Once proven, we would have a solid base upon which to roll out a broader scheme across Australia’s highest need communities.

“We look forward to meeting with the Minister in coming weeks to resume these discussions.

“There are real opportunities now to progress a unified approach to addressing an issue that impacts our position on the world stage. There is no reason why the Minister can’t be credited for having the best health system in the world. We just need to work together on improving rural health.”

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