



NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH ALLIANCE INC

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A 'Decade of Commitment' to Rural Health Can Begin with Budget 2000

A decade of government commitment to rural and remote areas is needed to improve the health of its people and the services they receive. This 'decade of commitment' can begin in earnest with Budget 2000. The NRHA has listed some of the announcements it would expect in such a Budget.

The NRHA is calling for Federal Budget decisions that are a balance of the urgent and the long-term, and also provide balanced support among the various health professions.

The urgent measures will help to meet immediate short-term needs, such as further improvements in Aboriginal health and the funding of the indigenous health sector, and for improved support for health workers across the board. The strategic announcements will begin to turn around the future for rural areas in the longer term, through a range of social and physical infrastructure and long-term investment in education and technology.

The NRHA Council is meeting in Canberra in the first week of March and will spell out in more detail its hopes for and its likely response to Budget 2000. The NRHA's views will be shaped by long-standing proposals from its Member Bodies, as well as by the health recommendations from the Regional Summit and the framework provided by *Healthy Horizons*.

Overall the proposals will involve substantial new spending on rural and remote health, which is clearly what the Communique and the delegates at the Regional Summit last year had in mind. Rural people will not expect internal government arguments about where the additional resources should come from to hold up progress on rural and regional development.

Announcements from the Budget in the urgent category sought by the Alliance include:

- A program to deliver affordable dental and oral health care for people on low incomes, especially those who are isolated in rural and remote areas.
- Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in all health professions, and for Indigenous Health Workers.
- Programs to enable local communities to access and use the data and other resources needed to allow them to play a major role in management and evaluation of their local health services (part of what the Summit called 'community capacity building').
- Changes in some of the health financing systems so that they meet more closely the needs of rural and remote areas.
- Work to try to ensure that fresh food is available and affordable in remote areas.
- A guaranteed future for programs for rural GP training, recruitment, training, placements and support, and more emphasis on their coordination.
- Creation of an equivalent workforce support system for nursing, including remote nursing. This will build on the successful scholarship scheme already in place.
- Creation of an equivalent workforce support system for rural and remote allied health. This will need to start virtually from scratch at the national level.

- Further support for recruitment, retention and training of rural and remote pharmacists, and for the transfer of pharmacies in selected areas.
- More resources for teleconference and videoconferencing work to support improvements in rural and remote health.

The Alliance recognises that the States and the Northern Territory are absolutely key partners with local communities and the Commonwealth in several of these urgent areas.

What is needed for the decade of commitment to work for improved health is concerted and collaborative action between State and Territory Governments and the Commonwealth. The Alliance believes that inter-government relations in health can be improved first in remote areas. Those areas have the greatest need for teamwork and there is less for individual interest groups to lose in remote areas. Lessons in collaboration learned in more remote areas can then hopefully be applied to the city and mainstream health services.

The NRHA will in future focus more strongly on ways in which inter-government relations in health can be improved.

In the strategic category the Alliance is calling for increased infrastructure spending and improvements in education and telecommunications services in rural and remote areas. The proportion of national expenditure going to physical and social infrastructure has fallen from 9 per cent in 1960 to around 4 per cent in the 1990s. The future prosperity of rural areas and the health of its people need investments now to turn around that long-term decline.

Priorities for the NRHA in the long-term strategies area include:

- Improved infrastructure for education, telecommunications, business support (including banking) and transport in rural and remote areas.
- Employment generation, including through additions to the stock of 'key centres' in rural and regional areas (such as the Clinical School at Wagga, the Rural Health Training Units and the University Departments of Rural Health), and involving young people in the value-adding initiatives of local businesses.
- Work to integrate health promotion activities related to key risk factors (smoking, exercise and nutrition) and on the link between patterns of disease and socio-economic status.
- Initiatives to strengthen the links between viable communities and smaller ones in their area, including through community leadership skills and mentoring.
- Strengthened relationship between work on ecological sustainability of rural areas, and environmental and social health.
- A Ministerial Rural Development Council, with the support of a Secretariat and a research capacity (referred to in earlier reports from the Alliance as a Rural Development Commission).

The Prime Minister's commitment to improve services in the bush will be seriously tested with the content and balance of the Budget brought down on 9 May. The relatively poor state of health in rural areas is now accepted. Expectations that something will be done have been raised. The recommendations from the Regional Summit and in *Healthy Horizons* provide clear direction to the Government. Budget 2000 has a unique opportunity to make a difference for people in rural and remote Australia.

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