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MEDIA RELEASE

1995 Budget and rural health: a useful step down a long road

Speaking from Alice Springs today, Sabina Knight, Chairperson of the National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA), expressed support for the rural health initiatives in Tuesday's Federal Budget.

"The recommendations of the 3rd National Rural Health Conference are still fresh in our minds, and it is pleasing that some of the matters of greatest concern to us have been given attention in the Budget", Ms Knight said.

"The NRHA is especially pleased at the Government's increased determination to act on suicide, and the explicit recognition that the figures on youth suicide for rural areas are particularly appalling.

"We are obviously also pleased that additional money has been allocated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services but this alone will not lead to significant improvement in this complex area. What is also required is better collaboration between the various agencies which deal with such things as employment and infrastructure for Aboriginal communities. Also, we need to strengthen still further the political will in Australia, and the determination of the Australian population as a whole, to work with indigenous people to improve their health and well-being."

Ms Knight expressed some concerns about the intention of the Government to reduce the rate of growth of Australia's medical workforce.

"We can understand why this is necessary in the national context but we are extremely concerned that if the total number of medical professionals in Australia is reduced, this could worsen the situation in rural and remote areas.

“Currently, many country towns have the services of overseas-trained doctors and it will be some time before the recent initiatives to increase the supply of practitioners to rural areas through other means bear fruit,” Ms Knight said.

It is accepted that health professionals trained overseas may be required to work on a temporary and limited basis in areas of need, including those in rural areas. However, the NRHA is fully supportive of training programs and other initiatives which will, in the long term, attract and train local health professionals to work in these areas of need.

“These considerations therefore increase still further our concern to see the Rural Incentives Program augmented and made even more flexible. We would also like to see remuneration systems for medical practitioners and other rural health workers which reflect the realities of their work in rural areas. If this could be achieved, it would be easier to retain health professionals in country areas as well as attracting them there,” Ms Knight said.

Ms Knight welcomed the reference in the Budget to support for people caring for the elderly, those with long illnesses or disabilities.

“I guess it’s a case of ‘so far so good’. The rural initiatives in the Budget will certainly help and we understand that resources are limited and that we must be patient. Nevertheless the NRHA will continue to point to other areas in which rural health consumers are disadvantaged compared with their metropolitan cousins, and continue its work towards the goal of ‘equal access for equal need’”, Ms Knight said.

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Note: Orders for the Proceedings of the 3rd National Rural Health Conference can be sent to the NRHA at the address above.