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Developing a national approach to brain injury rehabilitation services in rural and remote Australia

Executive Summary February 2012

Australians living in rural and remote areas who have had a sudden brain injury (resulting from trauma, or a medical event such as a stroke or haemorrhage) are typically admitted to metropolitan or large regional hospitals. Depending on the level of services required they will receive trauma and surgical care, leading to inpatient rehabilitation at that hospital before being discharged home or to other non-hospital services.

When the country person returns to their home or community after their discharge from the major hospital, the availability of clinical services related to brain injury (to both the person with the injury and their family) will vary widely. What is accessible to them is determined by a range of factors, including the jurisdictional model of brain injury rehabilitation; the insurance and funding model adopted by the particular State or Territory in which they find themselves; and the remoteness of the person's usual place of residence. These factors will also shape the rehabilitation culture of the service provider, and hence the type of clinical service with which the person with brain injury and their family engage.

This paper identifies the key elements of a post-hospital brain injury rehabilitation system that will optimise the outcome for the person living in rural and remote areas, including by supporting their adaptation to the various challenges and changes which the brain injury has created. An important aspect of such a model is ongoing access to specialist brain injury rehabilitation intervention strategies well beyond the hospitalisation phase.

The paper highlights the need for a better and more uniform range of responses to the person with brain injury after discharge from the initial treating hospital if they are returning to live in rural and remote Australia. This paper will also help to highlight the rural and remote aspects of the emerging debate about the Productivity Commission's disability reform proposals - specifically the proposal for a National Disability Insurance Scheme and a National Injury Insurance Scheme. It is important that through the development and implementation of these schemes the situation for rural people is enhanced.

Comments on these issues are welcome: to nrha@ruralhealth.org.au