

The state of rural and regional health—and its future

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In Australia there is a long-standing inequity where health funding is concerned between those who live in the major cities and those who live in rural and regional areas. Rebalancing this situation was one of the elements of the agreement signed between the two regional independents and the Prime Minister in 2010.

In his presentation, Rob will reflect on progress made since that time, and how people in rural and regional areas can be given a stronger voice on these matters. Further real progress will require firm and prudent national decisions on community services, welfare and potentially the tax system—especially at a time when significant expectations have been raised in areas such as disability services and education. It is significant that ABS figures show that the richest 20 per cent of Australians receive about half of all the wages paid but also get about 12 per cent of all government handouts.

Some of the work to improve equity in the funding of services for rural and remote areas can be led by parliamentary committee work and it must result in higher standards of accountability in the public sector, including effective oversight by bodies such as the Auditor-General. National leadership can also be exercised through upstream issues impacting on health and wellbeing, such as the Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Peoples, and work to minimise violence against women and girls.

Rob views non-metropolitan disengagement in education as one of the key economic failures of Australia and he continues to work on turning this around. The availability of high-speed broadband to rural and regional communities and businesses is also a critical issue and one that impacts on health and wellbeing.

The Independents' agreement with the Government has provided a number of funding 'wins' for rural health and hospitals, but much more needs to be done. The agreement included \$1.8 billion for rural and regional health infrastructure. So far, more than 100 hospitals and health centres in rural and regional Australia are being rebuilt or upgraded as a result.