

The state of rural and regional health—and its future

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This morning: three terrific speakers to give us some insight into those things. The first of them is Rob Oakeshott, who amongst other things may well be remembered for keeping us on the edge of our seats for 17 minutes. And I'm sure he's going to do that again this morning, but for very different reasons. Rob Oakeshott became the Member for Lyne back in 2008 at a by-election, you may recall, taking over from former Howard Trade Minister, Mark Vaile. He was born in Lismore, so he's a local, up in that northern New South Wales coast area. He has degrees in arts and law and has been involved in politics for many years, having been a former state member in New South Wales for some 12 years. And he's very involved in his local community in Port Macquarie. And I get to hear little bits from time to time from my rural reporter in Port Macquarie. Kim Honan, who is very active in that part of the country, gives me little tidbits about just what this fellow is up to, from time to time, and he is very engaged and involved with the local community, including things like being involved with the Port Macquarie Surf Life-Saving Club. So, to hear his reflections on the state of rural and regional health, it's my pleasure to introduce to you the honourable Rob Oakeshott, MHR.

Rob Oakeshott, MHR: Thanks, Lee. And as much as I love a chat and as passionate as I am about this topic, I promise I won't go for the infamous 17 minutes. As well, I apologise. I've got a shocking cold, and of all conferences to be at! Hopefully someone's got some bush medicine at the end to be able to provide me, but if you hear me coughing and spluttering halfway through, it's nothing to do with you. To traditional owners here and right around the country who may work in regional rural health and may be in the room, I certainly acknowledge your status and presence; to the organisers of this conference; to some of the faces in the room, and just on the way in I recognised Fred Chaney but there may be others. With the bright lights, I can't see you. But certainly I acknowledge all your roles in the important role you play in the various communities you represent. Heroes one and all, sung and unsung. And from the conversation I just had before coming up here, it sounds like a very impressive story of an award won last night, and does reflect the importance of the roles you all play and this conference itself in trying to make sure government gets it as well.

Going back to those 17 minutes and 17 days, which does feel like another life, for anyone who's wondering, there was one meeting that three independent MPs held offsite during that period to try and make a point to government, and to the country, of the importance of the group we were meeting with. It was you. It was—well—a variation of you: The National Rural Health Alliance. And it was saying to both major parties that if you want us, part of the for sale sign that we've got up is that you have to engage better with regional rural health and the workforce that is screaming for more equity and more support to build a better country.

Feedback to date over the last three years is in many ways that is happening, slowly, but it's happening in a number of different ways. I'm pleased that there is work being done on the National Strategic Framework for Regional, Rural and Remote Health. I acknowledge that Rural and Regional Health Australia is up and running and also that there's plenty more that needs to be done in making sure that organisation carves a space that makes a difference. The Chief Allied Health Officer, the NDIS Forums, the National Oral Health Plan, the Health Workforce Australia, work that many of you are involved with, the E-Health Strategy and one I'm particularly pleased now that you've taken up, with support of government, and hopefully you do get a positive audience, is the Social Determinants Alliance that you are in the process of forming or have formed. I think that is a really exciting chapter for community-based health strategies in a big, diverse country like ours. And that's really the theme of my speech, but I don't have the clock on, so if someone could ring the bell when my time's up?

Of all the peak organisations, I think of you, and maybe a couple of others, who should be glass half empty about the state of play; that you remain glass half full just shows the resilience of regional rural

Australia. The theme of your conference, despite the challenges, despite many of the negatives that we could all talk about, is a big hats off to all of you and the work that you do. But that optimism shouldn't be used as a weapon. It shouldn't be used by government as something to hide behind, and it shouldn't be used as some sort of excuse not to do more. And remaining optimistic, I think there is a great opportunity, not just in election seasons but something a lot deeper, a lot more structural that is going on in Australia, that is the great opportunity for peak organisations like yours. At a number of levels a place-based model of the way government works is the new black. It has become the trend of the moment and it's not a moment too soon. It's something that in my first speech to Parliament in 2008, I talked about as a huge advocate. I think it is the way to build sustainability in all programs, in everything we do, whether it's population health, whether it's grants, programs in all their forms; that that place-based model of government service and delivery, engaging communities early, and empowering and encouraging and listening, understanding, that is where you get sustainability and that is where you get real change in the social determinants.

I think we're at a bit of a crossroads moment where central governments and everything I've complained about in centralised government—is starting to want to reach out and wanting to develop regionalised models of business and working partnerships with regional rule in Australia, and, in this particular case, in health. From a government point of view, this year, a couple of those factors, activity based funding, Medicare Locals, you could roughly put them in the theme of trying to deliver more autonomy, trying to develop partnerships with communities. Some of the work that was negotiated on the back of the 2010 election was less—well potentially was on the structural side. For example, the \$1.4 billion in the regional development structures, the 56 regional development organisations that have now been established, and the five rounds of funding that we're seeing unfold for community-based initiatives on local infrastructure.

The Regional Health and Hospital Fund—the \$1.8 billion—going to a hundred regional hospitals, again negotiated on the back of the last election. Less structural, but potentially trying to encourage government to move towards being a bit more structural in the way they work with state governments, and deliver greater equity across the board. You combine that with some of the programs of the moment in the west, the Royalties for Regions Program. You're going to hear about some political parties who are flirting with some ideas from around the world for good and for bad. The UK Big Society is being looked at by some of the major parties. And these are all examples of right. Government is trying. They're not getting it right necessarily, but they're trying to reach out and trying to form these partnerships and really deliver on a place-based approach.

At the same time, I think at a big reform level, at a bipartisan level, non-elections, non-political parties, I think there are some really exciting structural changes happening within government. One is an acronym, which only someone in Treasury or Finance could have come up with, called CFAR: the Commonwealth Financial Accountability Reforms. They are happening now. You know, in a bit of a 'below the table' way, but you will hear more about (I think) a really good principle called earned autonomy. And so all government departments across the smallest to the largest, earn that autonomy from particularly finance and if they perform—and most do—there will be more trust and more ability to have more autonomy to do more and work in closer partnership with the community.

At a vertical level, I think something which has been the enormous frustration and, in my view, a great inhibitor of the last three years in our ability to achieve more, is this relationship of the Commonwealth and the state. I think COAG's onto it. I do think the Heads of Treasury Review which happened over the last 18 months has made some really strong recommendations, and I think we are now starting to see an important move in that big reform area from that whole idea of outputs to outcomes. And importantly, Auditors-General now will have some oversight over those COAG processes which, personally I think, has been the big problem in the way the COAG processes have worked to date, that lack of oversight because of sovereign boundaries. Now, with the ability to follow the money trail all the way through, there is a much greater chance of things like resource distribution formulas actually being

delivered in an equitable way, rather than skimmed or twisted or turned to suit the needs of the particular moment or a particular government.

So combining those big bipartisan reform areas that are going on both horizontally and vertically, combining some of those flavours of the moment that are the political issues of an active regional party in the west delivering on a program, some country independents federally working on a program, major political parties looking at successes, “overseas” and looking on how some of these programs of community based engagement can work better, I think there’s a great opportunity. And it’s a great opportunity that cannot be squandered. My pitch therefore today is, in election season, don’t miss this opportunity. Don’t let it be some oxymoronic, centralised partnership where Canberra or some other government just cannot work it out and cannot let go and cannot build trust and cannot build partnership, even if they’re wanting to or trying to.

I have seen it in the programs negotiated over the last three years on a number of fronts. It was nearly \$10 billion to be delivered over the past three years, but just the difficulty to get through that—the layers of bureaucracy to get people to release, to get people to trust and to get people to work in partnership—was the major headache and the lesson learnt after the event. We should have known that at the time and made that part of the negotiation, that the release of that money and the engagement with community was a lot, lot smoother than what it proved to be.

So please, the question for Australia right now, and the question for this conference right now, is just one of wealth and prosperity. Most economic theory says wealth and prosperity leads to urbanisation. Australia is known as one of the most urbanised countries in the world. Go figure in a big country like ours. The question being put to us all right now is whether we accept that economic theory, whether we look at other countries around the world, whether we look at the textbooks and say, ‘Wealth and prosperity can only be delivered one way. Urbanisation is an example of that great growth, that great wealth, that great prosperity, that improvement in standards of living.’ I hope we’re better than that. I hope we as Australians, and you as an organisation, and this as a conference, are willing to challenge it. And that Australia can be the one—if there has to be the one—with the great country that we’ve got of diverse regions, of diverse landscape, diverse peoples and a big, big country, to be the one that says, ‘No, there’s a way that wealth and prosperity can be delivered in an equitable way that engages all regions and that engages all communities and engages a big country.’

I’m nervous this moment will be lost. I’m nervous we’ll continue to just keep doing what we’re doing. I’m nervous that the culture in the corridors of most parliaments is urbanisation, you know, is wealth and prosperity and this cycle of, ‘That’s where the people are, that’s where the votes are, that’s the game we play.’ It’s got to be broken and your conference, you know—I rarely leave my electorate to talk at major conferences. I come here to passionately ask you to fight and fight hard over the next six months, and to use that big reform agenda that’s happening anyway, to really make sure that we are a country that is wealthy in all its regions and that we don’t miss the opportunity to nail equity. Equity is the key.

At the start of this parliament the message at that conference in that 17 days was roughly about \$2 billion was being lost in the system by state governments and federal governments own resource distribution formulas not being delivered. I think there’s been a lot of work to try and address that and there’s a huge opportunity to try and beat that and really get that equity nailed down across the country. I hope you’re up for it because if we miss it, we’re just back to where we started from.

I finish with one local example as a positive. In doing this, in delivering equity, I think we’re a country that does individuals really, really well. Progressive tax system, a safety net, you know this concept of a welfare capitalist country. We should be proud of all of those who do what we can to make sure every individual is part of our country. We do groupings okay. We’ve got a lot of analysis, a lot of data on sectors. You know I could tell you the ins and outs of the manufacturing sector. I could tell you the ins and outs of impacts of policy on single mothers.

What we don't do yet very well at all is locations. And it was only a couple weeks ago that the census data and the Social Disadvantage Index was released. I didn't see it in a single paper. I didn't see it covered by anyone. And I think it's that third issue that I'm raising today that is the important one, that I hope we can get some focus on, is these location based strategies to deal with genuine disadvantage in our country. I have one locally, the community of Kempsey. It remains in one of the top half a dozen post codes in our country for social disadvantage. Most are regional, most are rural. You know there is a direct equation of poorness equals rural equals poor infrastructure, you know poor social determinants. The link is there. What we've got to do is make sure that link is exposed and that all governments in partnership with community are then willing to do something about it. So that Social Disadvantage Index for me is the priority issue that is being missed and that we, in partnership between community and government, need to do much, much more to make sure those areas that are repeatedly exposed as areas of disadvantage get more work done on them from all of us, from all angles. So I'm looking forward to the fireside chat and thank you for having me today.

Look forward to talking to as many of you as possible after this forum. And please, let's get serious about making sure—I know all of you are serious—but really in an election context and with the opportunity that's presenting itself from government, let's get serious in making sure this opportunity is not missed to resolve these issues of equity that are important to all of us.

Thanks.