MEDIA RELEASE

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Improving systems for rural and remote health

Three national health leaders will come together in a plenary session at the 12th National Rural Health Conference to describe some of the positive systemic developments which provide the basis for better health in rural and remote areas.

Chris Baggoley, the Australian Government’s Chief Medical Officer, will discuss how health services in rural areas - already stretched by large distances, higher costs and workforce shortages - can nevertheless be well prepared to meet the challenges posed by environmental disasters such as floods and fires, animal borne infections, and epidemics.

Rural and remote areas are home to some of the most innovative systems in health care and also have some of the natural advantages provided by community resilience. These should be built upon and celebrated, but not used as a necessary or sufficient replacement for having mainstream health services available to communities in rural and remote areas. Systemic approaches to safety and quality must not set the bar so high as to risk unnecessary service closures in remote areas.

Sue Middleton is a Councillor on the Council of Australian Government (COAG) Reform Council. The reports on performance prepared and published by the COAG Council are valuable for individuals and organisations seeking to influence systemic change and to achieve improvements to rural health outcomes. The data provide public information about how jurisdictions are meeting their joint commitment to a healthcare system that provides all Australians with timely access to quality health services based on their needs, not on their ability to pay or where they live.

Reports from the COAG Reform Council have demonstrated the great disparities in health outcomes between cities and rural or remote areas - much of which is attributable to the performance of governments rather than individual clinicians or hospitals.

Mick Reid will report at the 12th Conference on work involving the Health Departments of South Australia, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland to improve the lot of health professionals in the remote areas of those jurisdictions and the health of the people who live there. Those four jurisdictions are collaborating closely and working with the Commonwealth on health workforce recruitment and retention, service planning, maintaining the health workforce skill base, telehealth services and better returns from investments in infrastructure.

More information on the Conference can be found at www.ruralhealth.org.au