Changes to eligible midwifery status—new possibilities for rural maternity care

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Eligible midwifery status presents a tremendous opportunity for expanding rural access to maternity care. Recent changes to the Standing Council on Health’s determination on collaborative arrangements, which allow for collaboration with health services instead of a named obstetrician, are particularly relevant. Eligible midwives in rural settings have the potential to reduce the financial and emotional burden of extensive travel for antenatal care, and more importantly, the risks women will not access care due to prohibitive time and cost requirements. This is also relevant to Indigenous women, for whom birthing on their own land has additional significance.

Rural and remote consumers have highly limited access to antenatal care, local birthing services, and postnatal care that most Australian women take for granted. Closure or downgrading of rural maternity services transfers the economic, logistical and emotional burden of care from governments to families, and presents additional risks in terms of late or no access to antenatal care. The resultant de-skilling of local health professionals presents serious difficulties if and when emergencies present.

The National Rural Health Alliance puts forward excellent recommendations for improving and expanding access to rural maternity care, but thus far neglects the opportunity presented by eligible midwifery. To support rural maternity care, significant research is required on the recruitment, retention and impact of eligible midwives in rural areas. This presentation will discuss policy guidelines and incentives to utilise eligible midwives in rebuilding rural maternity care. This includes policy requirements for rural hospitals to negotiate in good faith to establish collaborative relationships; funding for rural midwives to achieve the additional qualifications to become eligible midwives; and thoughtful retention of new direct-entry midwifery graduates, within appropriate models of care. This paper will also discuss international research and successes in rural maternity care, and the implications for policy development in Australia.