Maximising the rural health benefits of a reformed health system: Medicare Locals

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What are Medicare Locals?
Medicare Locals are regional primary health care organisations, established to coordinate primary health care service planning and delivery, and address local health care needs and gaps. There are 61 Medicare Locals covering all regions of Australia.

Medicare Locals have been established as independent companies with management and staffing structures to suit the needs of their communities and organisations. In many instances, this includes a combination of clinical, program and administrative staff to deliver their objectives.

Medicare Locals are playing an important role in planning services at a local level. They work closely with local service providers and have detailed knowledge of the services available in their catchment to inform the development of comprehensive population needs assessments and planning processes that respond to locally prioritised needs. Medicare Locals have at their disposal a flexible pool of funds to address these needs and ensure responsiveness to emerging community needs. This is in addition to a variety of program-specific funding.

What is the Australian Medicare Local Alliance?
The Australian Medicare Local Alliance (AML Alliance) has been established to support Medicare Locals across Australia through coordination and leadership. The AML Alliance facilitates stakeholder consultation at a national level, such as with peak representative organisations, and is engaging with the broader range of primary health care providers and related sectors such as social and aged care, through a Primary Health Stakeholder Forum. It also provides jurisdictional support to Medicare Locals to meet their strategic objectives, and assists in interactions with state and territory governments.

Benefits to patients in rural and remote areas
One of the common concerns of rural and remote communities is the absence of planned approaches to service delivery between the major service providers, which can lead to significant gaps in some service provision and unnecessary duplication of others. The advent of Medicare Locals is an important initiative designed to address this planning gap.

A particular role for Medicare Locals is to identify where there are service gaps and where patients are missing out on services. Medicare Locals are working collaboratively with local clinicians and health care providers to address those gaps, and improve the coordination and integration of health care services to ensure that patients receive the right care, in the right place, at the right time, regardless of where they live.

Through this work, rural and remote communities are being supported to strengthen and tailor primary health care services to meet local needs and improve health outcomes through the implementation of sustainable local solutions. Examples of Medicare Local initiatives include: teaming up with the Royal Flying Doctor Service to provide free patient transport and support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with chronic conditions; developing collaborative GP rosters to provide after hours care across harder to service regions; and employing front line clinicians to deliver health services in small local communities so that patients do not have to travel. More information about Medicare Locals can be found at www.yourhealth.gov.au