

...healthy and sustainable rural, regional and remote communities.

COVID-19 shines a light on health literacy

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The National Rural Health Alliance, the peak body for rural and remote health in Australia, has echoed calls for governments to address health literacy in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

An article in [Croakey](#) highlights low levels of health literacy in Australia and points to the need for both the Australian Government as well as federal and state governments to improve communication, which the authors describe as “unclear, ad hoc, inconsistent, and often poorly timed.”

“Health literacy is all about people’s ability to access, interpret and use information relating to health and health care,” said National Rural Health Alliance CEO Dr Gabrielle O’Kane.

“This is important all the time but especially in the face of COVID-19, when there is so much information being circulated and people are being required to take drastic steps to alter their behaviour.

“Rural areas in Australia often have slightly lower levels of health literacy as well. Public communication needs to take this into account and recognise that different messages and platforms might be needed in rural areas as opposed to the cities.”

Dr O’Kane said that digital health literacy was becoming increasingly important, as the population moves rapidly to take up telehealth.

“We’ve all had to embrace telehealth a lot quicker than we thought we would. This brings with it the need to ensure that practitioners and consumers have the skills and confidence they need to use these services.

“The Alliance’s [pre-budget submission](#) contains several positive measures that would improve digital health literacy in rural Australia and we call on the Australian Government to take them up.

“This includes the Rural Community Digital Health Literacy Training Program, which would deliver digital skills programs to older Australians, and the Rural Digital Health Scholarship and Bursary Program, which would provide scholarships and bursaries to help rural health professionals develop skills and knowledge in digital health technology.”

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The National Rural Health Alliance is Australia’s peak non-government organisation for rural and remote health.