

4 February 2020

Pandemic, bushfire, drought cluster prompts call for National Rural Health Strategy

The National Rural Health Alliance (the Alliance) is calling for the development of a new National Rural Health Strategy and Implementation Plan to respond to increasingly intense extreme weather events and the global pandemic.

In the Alliance's Pre-budget Submission 2021-22, CEO Gabrielle O'Kane says the new National Rural Health Strategy will be a strategic driver of rural health policy at a time when the current inadequate health system is under acute pressure.

"A new strategy for rural and remote health is needed to respond to the significant health challenges which have emerged from climate change, in particular the frequency and intensity of bushfires, drought, temperature extremes and other weather events. This is particularly relevant for rural and remote Australians who are disproportionately affected by these events.

"Likewise, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is testing the rural health system, exposing the limited capacity to respond to events such as pandemics, including through workforce shortages and appropriate facilities.

"Wherever people choose to live across Australia, they should have access to quality and affordable health care which does not compromise the standard of care they receive or jeopardise their health outcomes."

Ms O'Kane says the new National Rural Health Strategy proposed by the Alliance will be set up for success by having measures and targets with a requirement for annual reviews and reporting.

"A critical element missing from previous frameworks has been an implementation plan that includes specific measures, targets and an evaluation schedule at five and ten-year intervals. It could also include minimum service access standards for rural and remote Australia."

On average, Australians living in rural and remote areas have shorter lives, higher levels of disease and injury and poorer access to and use of health services, compared with people living in metropolitan areas.

“Despite there being a high level of awareness of the often-significant disparities in health outcomes between urban and rural Australia, health outcomes for rural Australians have not been consistently improving over time, but rather are stagnating or, in some instances, declining,” Ms O’Kane said.

A timely National Rural Health Strategy is one of three overarching proposals in the Alliance’s Pre-budget Submission 2021-22. The second proposal is a focus on alternative funding models for innovative models of rural healthcare. The third proposal involves strengthening health system access and telehealth in the bush.

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