

**Australian Medical Association Limited**

**ABN 37 008 426 793**

42 Macquarie Street, Barton ACT 2600: PO Box 6090, Kingston ACT 2604  
 Telephone: (02) 6270 5400 Facsimile (02) 6270 5499  
 Website : <http://www.ama.com.au/>



**AMA WELCOMES COALITION’S INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT RURAL HEALTH**

The AMA welcomes the Coalition’s announcement that it will, if re-elected, appoint a National Rural Health Commissioner and develop a National Rural Generalist Pathway to support the recruitment and retention of doctors in regional, rural and remote Australia.

AMA President Dr Michael Gannon said the appointment of a National Rural Health Commissioner had the potential to boost the profile of rural health issues in Government decision making and health policy development, while the establishment of a Rural Generalist Pathway could boost the much-needed recruitment and retention of skilled practitioners in rural areas.

“Australians living in rural areas have lower life expectancy and poorer health than those in the cities, so it is vital that rural health issues sit high on the policy agendas of governments,” Dr Gannon said.

“A National Rural Health Commissioner that is able to bring this sort of focus to Government deliberations could make a real difference.”

Rural Health Minister Senator Fiona Nash today announced that a Coalition Government would appoint a National Rural Health Commissioner to help develop rural health policies and “champion the cause of rural practice”.

But Dr Gannon said that, to be effective, the Commissioner had to be backed by adequate resources.

“Similar initiatives have been tried in the past, such as setting up Regional and Rural Health Australia within the Department of Health, but these have not had the level of impact that had been hoped for,” he said.

“It is vital that this new role be given real teeth and a prominent role in health policy development.”

Senator Nash said one of the first tasks of the Commissioner would be to develop a new National Rural Generalist Pathway and set out a blueprint for reform.

Dr Gannon said the establishment of a Rural Generalist Pathway could help boost the number of GPs working in rural areas.

“GPs are the backbone of health care in many rural and remote communities, and the development of a national scheme that supports advanced skills training and recognises the often unique circumstances of rural general practice is a very welcome proposal that addresses a very real need.

“This would be a much better investment in rural health than a new medical school.

“Rural doctors who took part in a recent AMA survey identified the recruitment and retention of doctors in regional, rural and remote areas, expanded access to training in rural areas and support for procedural skills for GP as three of their top priorities.

“The Coalition’s announcement sits well with addressing these concerns.”

But Dr Gannon cautioned that developing the pathway would have to be done carefully and in close consultation with the medical profession.

“Australia has a renowned system of GP training, overseen by the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine,” he said.

“It will be essential that the new national pathway is part of, and builds on, these arrangements, and there will need to be strong engagement from the States and Territories, who will need to support the creation of additional advanced skills training places for GP trainees.

“If the Coalition is re-elected, the AMA looks forward to working with the new National Rural Health Commissioner on rural health policy, including in relation to the design and implementation of the proposed Rural Generalist Pathway.”

The AMA has urged both the major parties to increase investment in rural health.

Last month, the AMA released its *Plan for Better Health Care for Regional, Rural, and Remote Australia*, and Dr Gannon urged the major parties to adopt its recommendations.

“To close the rural-city health gap, it is essential that policies and resources are tailored to cater for the unique demands of rural health care,” the AMA President said.

The AMA Plan proposes a focus on four key areas - rebuilding country hospital infrastructure; supporting recruitment and retention of doctors; encouraging more young doctors to work in rural areas; and supporting rural practices.

“Addressing and investing in these measures will make a long-term difference to the health of Australians living in rural communities,” Dr Gannon said.

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CONTACT: Kirsty Waterford 02 6270 5464 / 0427 209 753

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