



**AUSTRALIAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION
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Country Health: Let's hang on to what we've got

The effort to build up health services in the four major regional centres of Port Lincoln, Whyalla, Berri and Mount Gambier is a laudable objective but must not come at the expense of the medical services we already have in the country regions, says AMA(SA) President Dr Peter Ford.

Dr Peter Ford was commenting on his return from a 5-day visit to country South Australia, where many meetings and interviews with local doctors were held on the priorities for delivering health care to country South Australians.

'The government's commitment to invest in these Regional General Hospitals is commendable, but we must be very careful not to lose the multi-skilled general practitioners we already have.

'The demography of SA is unlike rural and regional centres in the eastern states. In the main we do not have the regional populations which may justify a full complement of resident specialist services, with the capacity to provide 24 hour care, and full holiday and leave cover. For most of country SA, there is an essential dependence on broadly-skilled GPs.

'The introduction of specialist 'Regional General Hospitals' carries a risk of limiting the role of GPs who currently perform procedural services, such as anaesthesia, obstetrics and some surgery, as well as limiting the range of services in the hospitals of smaller towns.

'If for example, all obstetrics is relocated to the 4 major centres, regional GPs will have to relinquish obstetrics—it is just not practical to manage a delivery in Berri when the doctor's practice is in Barmera or Loxton. These places may look in close proximity on a map, but the reality is that the distances are considerable for a doctor managing a patient.

'Doctors do not necessarily want to change their practice in this way. And the risk is if doctors lose their procedural accreditation and capacity, many will move on, leaving smaller towns underserved, or even without a GP.

'Any change to the delivery of health services in country areas needs to demonstrate that the funding will be adequate to deliver local services - and that changes in models of service delivery do not come at the expense of local medical practices.

'These are the things we are concerned about. These are the things that must be in the "meat on the bones" of the revised Country Health Care Plan.

'And of course, local doctors want more say in bureaucratic decisions that affect how health services are delivered in the country. Morale for doctors and nurses in the health system is critical to success, and we must have a collaborative approach.

'Given that support, doctors' loyalty to their communities will continue to be exemplary, and governments will continue to receive high level return on their health investment in the bush,' concluded Dr Ford.

3 November 2008

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