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Speech highlights rural health deficiencies

A speech delivered last night by Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Nationals, Mark Vaile, clearly highlighted deficiencies in health services for rural Australians, according to the Australian General Practice Network (AGPN).

AGPN Chair Dr Tony Hobbs (a GP in the NSW rural town of Cootamundra) said Minister Vaile's comments regarding rural hospital waiting lists, cancer patient outcomes and maternity services paint a realistic and grim picture of health services in country Australia.

"The health system in Australia is simply inequitable. Minister Vaile suggests patients in rural areas that are diagnosed with cervical or prostate cancer are more likely to die than their urban counterparts. This is clearly unfair," Dr Hobbs said.

Minister Vaile outlined a number of welcome strategies the government have implemented to try and combat these problems, such as doubling the incentive payment for GPs performing various procedures, for example obstetrics and surgery.

In addition to speaking about health, Minister Vaile also indicated a number of other barriers rural medicos faced earlier this century and still do today such as roads and communication.

High speed broadband for rural practices can have a major impact on rural GP retention and patient care.

"It can reduce the need for patients to travel long distances, as GPs can consult online with specialists in urban areas and determine if referral is necessary.

"It also allows GPs to continue their ongoing compulsory professional development without leaving their practices. It also makes it far easier to access patient records when consulting remotely.

Regional road infrastructure has two direct links to rural general practice.

"Firstly, improving regional roads can significantly reduce accidents. In many instances the local GP is trained in emergency medicine and deals with the trauma as a result.

"Secondly GPS in rural areas often have to travel vast distances via road to treat patients. Having appropriate access is essential.

"I welcome the Federal Government's commitment to improving regional Australia's road network through its five year transport plan Auslink and the upcoming Auslink2," Dr Hobbs said.

AGPN CEO Kate Carnell said the Federal Government has recognised the problems facing rural health care in Australia and has implemented some good strategies, however much more needs to be done.

"We know rural Australia doesn't get the same level of care as metropolitan Australia.

“Vibrant rural centres with all the ingredients that make them attractive places to live - good schools, good roads, good communication, good services and employment opportunities- is the foundation for healthy communities.

“AGPN firmly believe it’s the responsibility of all Australians to ensure people living in rural areas receive the same level of health care as those in our cities,” Ms Carnell said.

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