

23 August 2007

Rudd's plan could well deliver better health for Australians

The Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) today welcomed Labor's health plan saying it takes an essential step in recognising the importance of preventative health care in Australia.

AGPN Chair Dr Tony Hobbs said he is particularly pleased with the strong emphasis on primary health care.

"It is important to focus on keeping people healthy and out of hospital.

"Labor has exposed the huge inequality in relation to Medicare per capita spending, particularly in regional and remote areas. Spending here is far lower than in major urban areas, and the overall health of rural and remote Australians is poorer.

"It is not good enough to be spending \$432 per capita in a capital city and only \$350 in the areas that need it most - rural and regional Australia.

"Unfortunately until we can get more access to services in regional areas, these issues will not be addressed. One way to do this is to increase the numbers of practice nurses and allied health professionals in these areas. On a number of occasions we have asked the Government to increase funding to services that allow divisions of general practice to employ more allied health professionals. We know this funding will increase affordable access to services such as dietitians and psychologists.

We also know GP workforce shortages are no longer confined to rural areas. Our cities are also affected," Dr Hobbs said.

AGPN has designed the Practice Nurse Package that will increase the number of nurses working in general practice. This will help alleviate workforce shortages and improve preventative care throughout the country. It aims to attract some of the 25,000 trained nurses currently not working in health into the practice nursing arena.

"Attracting trained nurses back to the practice nurse workforce would be a major boost to general practice - a workforce that is currently under siege. For example, we know that employing a practice nurse will allow a GP to see on average 16 more patients a week.

"We also know the interest is out there. A pilot program in Wagga Wagga NSW advertised for 20 applicants to undertake a five day nursing refresher course focused on general practice. It attracted over 60 applicants. The program required eligible applicants to hold current nursing registration, to have been out of nursing for no more than five years and to not be currently employed as a nurse.

"National rollout of this program should be supported by an induction program and an orientation course. This, supported by extension of the Practice Nurse Practice Incentive Payment to all general practices, would deliver a significant boost to the general practice workforce.

"Labor's plan throws out the challenge to the Coalition - it could well pay off for Australians. I'm looking forward to seeing both the detail and the Federal Government's response," Dr Hobbs said.

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