

4 December 2006

Regional mental health needs instant action

Calls today by Yass GP Ray Burn have been supported by the Australia's peak body representing general practice, the Australian General Practice Network (AGPN).

AGPN Chair Dr Tony Hobbs said Dr Burn's comments suggesting poor mental health services in the bush are accurate and far more needs to be done to improve access for patients needing help.

"AGPN and *beyondblue* have written to the Prime Minister outlining a three pronged approach of how to improve these services.

"Basically we have put forward a plan to: increase awareness; build effective community resilience groups; and employ psychologists and community coordinators where they are needed most. This approach would ensure appropriate services and support is available locally in drought affected areas.

"We have already seen how this year's Australian Government commitment of \$1.9 billion to mental health is benefiting Australians. The Federal Government needs to build on this success, especially in the bush.

"Shortages of psychiatrists and psychologists continue to be a major problem in country areas.

"What is needed is improved capacity for local divisions of general practice to encourage mental health professionals to relocate to drought affected areas," Dr Hobbs said.

Already divisions have implemented local solutions to the lack of psychologists. The *Riverina Division of General Practice and Primary Health* recognised a shortage of psychological services in their south-west NSW community. They understood the difficulty of recruiting and retaining staff and created an innovative program whereby an intern was employed and provided with professional and administrative support and supervision from the division.

To date their intern has been able to provide help to almost 300 patients. It is innovative local ideas such as this one that actually make a difference.

In addition to increased mental health professional numbers in the bush, broadband infrastructure needs to be expanded. This would allow for remote consultations with psychologists and psychiatrists.

AGPN CEO Kate Carnell welcomed the increased mental health funding but urged the government to look favourably on the *beyondblue*/AGPN submission.

"This submission is logical and workable. It encourages building on services and government policy that is already in place," Ms Carnell said.

For more information please call AGPN CEO Kate Carnell on 0415 662 266