

Federal Budget 2024 reaction  
14 May 2024

## Rural doctors hope Breadcrumbs Budget leads to something bigger next year

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) says tonight's Federal Budget is a 'missed opportunity' for long-term, big picture measures that would deliver a sustainable medical workforce to the bush and a viable rural health system into the future.

"This is a Breadcrumbs Budget, largely full of piecemeal funding gestures, and we are keen to understand where it leads" **RDAA President, Dr RT Lewandowski, said.** "We need to understand what reforms the Government has in mind for delivering long-term improvements to the health sector – because we aren't seeing them at the moment.



"With the large number of reviews undertaken in the past 12 months or about to be completed, we had anticipated a clearer indication from the Government that they would be getting things in order for some big ticket future reforms – but there is little, if any, evidence of this in tonight's Budget.

"There are a myriad of small funding packages here and there that will be welcomed by rural doctors and rural patients, but there is nothing in this Budget that will underpin a holistic, full-scale approach to improving access to healthcare in the bush, or to growing the rural health workforce.

"We had put forward numerous, considered, big picture measures to greatly improve access to health professionals and health services in the bush, but sadly these seem to have been ignored.

"The medium to long-term viability of rural general practice is at serious risk, particularly in rural and remote communities, and a new funding structure is urgently required so they can stay afloat and continue to provide care for their patients into the future. This is not about what GPs are getting paid, but the whole funding model for rural and remote general practice.

"Yet the Government has opted to return to the old way of general practice funding, item by item. There was nothing new in the Budget regarding MyMedicare. The frequent hospital users funding has been previously announced and yet there is still little detail on how it will actually work.

"We are hopeful that this year's Budget is a one-off, and that the breadcrumbs we have seen this year will lead to bigger things in next year's Budget."

**Dr Lewandowski said RDAA is also very disappointed with the Government's decision to preclude medical students from its initiative to provide cost of living support for teaching, nursing, midwifery and social work students during their mandatory practical and clinical placements.**

"We have raised our concerns with the Government about this, as medical students should rightly receive the same support for their mandatory placements, and we join other medical peaks in asking the Government to address this issue" **he said.**

“Like other university students, medical students have a very low income and struggle to make ends meet. Given the significant time that they need to put into their studies, many find it very difficult to hold down a part-time job – so they absolutely deserve the same support in undertaking mandatory placements as students in other sectors.”

**Dr Lewandowski said RDAA welcomes the Government’s announcement of a new medical school for Charles Darwin University and additional Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) for medical students, but said investment in tertiary training alone is not enough to ensure a strong uptake of general practice places in the future, least of all in rural and remote locations.**

“Without significant follow-on investment through initiatives like the John Flynn Prevocational Program – to open up more training and experiential opportunities for junior doctors in rural general practice – and without better support for the experienced doctors who will be needed to supervise and train the next generation of doctors (and the practices that host them), our communities in rural and remote Australia will continue to struggle to find medical care close to home” **he said.**

**RDAA has welcomed various other initiatives announced in this Budget including:**

- Extending Single Employer Model pilots to 31 December 2028, to make it easier for junior doctors to transition from the hospital system into general practice training. While this commitment costs the Federal Government nothing, it is a key initiative and the time extension will give the states confidence to further develop and enhance their models. Victoria and WA are due to come online with their SEM models in 2025, so junior doctors applying for places under these models will be assured that their arrangements will be in place for the duration of their training program.
- Scholarships for registered nurses and midwives to become nurse practitioners and endorsed midwives in primary and aged care settings.
- Funding for 29 additional Urgent Care Clinics (UCCs) and additional funding for Medicare UCCs located in regional, rural and remote Australia – however, **Dr Lewandowski said:** “There must be a commitment from the Government to ensure UCCs will not impact after-hours services that are already being provided in rural communities. UCCs in rural communities need to be integrated with current services, not set up in competition, particularly with regard to the recruitment of local health professionals. Rural and remote settings require integrated primary and hospital after-hours care to make it sustainable.
- The Government’s investment of \$17.4 million to support health services at risk of closing in ‘thin market’ areas, to be administered by Primary Health Networks and the Rural Workforce Agencies. **Dr Lewandowski said:** “The investment is appreciated, but we need both investment and system reform so we can prevent ‘thin market’ crises – not move from one community in crisis with their health services to the next.”
- Funding for PBS prescriptions for the elderly, longer consultations for endometriosis and other gynaecological presentations, free sanitary products for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and increased mental health support measures.

“We await large system reform in the primary health sector as a result of the reviews that the Government has been undertaking, as they have access to a huge number of innovative solutions and system reform ideas from a whole range of individuals and organisations” **Dr Lewandowski said.**

“We have seen a trail of breadcrumbs this Budget – the question is, will it lead to something bigger soon?”

“We really hope so.”

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**RDAA’s Pre-Budget Submission is available [here](#).**

**A high resolution photo of Dr RT Lewandowski is available [here](#).**

**Available for interview** – RDAA President, Dr RT Lewandowski and RDAA CEO, Ms Peta Rutherford

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