



16th December, 2011

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Secretary

Submission to Senate Standing Committee

The factors affecting the supply of health services and medical professionals in rural areas.

The City of Mount Gambier, being the local government authority of a regional community, is very aware of issues associated with the attraction and retention of medical professionals in rural areas. Mount Gambier has a population of 27,000 but provides services to a regional population of over 60,000.

The factors affecting the supply of health services, medical, nursing, and allied health professionals include:

- Long hours of work
- Difficulty in attracting locums for the taking of leave
- Long distance between clinic locations
- Lack of appropriate continuing medical education
- After hours and on call services
- Lack of opportunity to work within the local hospital
- Education and employment for spouse; when the spouse is not in the medical profession.

The City of Mount Gambier is very proud of the efforts of our local Associate Professor, Lucy Walters who had been a driving force for the establishment of the Flinders University Rural Clinical School (FURCS) and the parallel Rural Community Curriculum based in Mount Gambier that has major benefits for our community. These facilities enable students to experience the benefits of rural living and medical practice informing them about placements in the country on completion of their studies thereby improving the capacity of the region to deliver medical services in our community. Without this, rural areas tend to lose potential medical professionals from their own populations when they are required to relocate to major capital cities for their education needs.

In conjunction with the clinical practice placements, FURCS also calls on community members as mentors to assist the students with their placement in the locality to assimilate into the community, a "grass roots" approach to capacity building.



The functions of Medicare Local remains confusing to communities and the City of Mount Gambier shares the concerns of the AMA in that there is the potential for precious health resources to be diverted away from direct service delivery. It is Council's belief that Medicare Local should not be an additional level of administration as it would be if it were to be a fund holding body.

Supported by research completed by Dr Elizabeth Hemphill, Peter Hammer, and Katherine Anderson of Marketing Science Centre, University of South Australia, time issues associated with travelling away for continuing medical education together with the work loads of the rural practitioner are major issues affecting the lives of rural practitioners. Medicare Local needs to take up the role of providing such education locally whether by means of holding national conferences in the area or shorter focussed training sessions.

The training should not be confined to that of the General Practitioner but needs to include all allied professionals, nursing skill development and practice, dental continuing education, dieticians, public health practitioners, mental health clinician further development and physiotherapy continuing education.

The difficulties associated with attracting locums to enable practitioners in small rural communities to take annual, study leave and/or sick leave should also be a high priority role for Medicare Locals.

There needs to be a high emphasis on the mental health prevention roles and in particular the prevention of domestic violence that has long term consequences for mental health.

Obesity is a major issue in Australia and Mount Gambier is not immune from this issue and the chronic illness that it gives rise to. This issue needs to be addressed by a combination of practitioners as the causes of obesity are very complex and a team approach to dealing with the issues must include dieticians, physical activity programs and psychological intervention.

The ever increasing ageing population will in future years create a high burden of disease on communities and the specialised gerontology clinicians will need to be included in the skill mix required to provide services in the community.

We note that the Senate Committee will be holding at least one public hearing in South Australia and due to the reasons outlined in our submission we consider that this hearing should occur in Mount Gambier.

The City of Mount Gambier will be pleased to expand on any of the issues raised in this submission.

Yours faithfully

Grant HUMPHRIES
DIRECTOR, CORPORATE AND COMMUNITY SERVICES