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Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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**Submission to the Senate Inquiry on
the factors affecting the supply of health services and
medical professionals in rural areas**

As has been outlined by the many detailed submissions to this timely and very welcome inquiry, there are multiple factors that affect the supply of health services and medical professionals in rural areas.

Primarily, the one that Rural Health Education Foundation focuses on and works to redress is the professional and personal isolation of healthcare professionals who live and work in rural and remote areas. More specifically, we work to overcome the lack of available, affordable and accessible health education and information that practitioners need for their professional registration and to ensure they remain up-to-date with their clinical knowledge and skills. This is vital for the successful recruitment and retention of healthcare providers to rural Australia.

The people living in these areas suffer more chronic disease and injuries, and die earlier than their city counterparts. Attracting and keeping your local doctor, nurse, healthcare worker is fundamental to the community remaining vibrant and sustainable, and to addressing these health inequities.

The Rural Health Education Foundation is an independent, non-profit organisation who produces and delivers health education programs to those healthcare professionals living and working in rural and remote areas. This is the 20th year we have been doing this work, and our vision is unchanged in that time. We aim to improve the health outcomes of people in these distant regions by supporting practitioners to be able to provide quality and informed care. To do this, healthcare practitioners need to be able to keep up to date with the mass of ever-changing clinical developments, updated guidelines and expert opinion and experience.

It is easy for those of us living and working in metropolitan and inner regional areas to forget the ease with which we can access a vast array of health information, education and training. There are numerous events that we can attend: workshops, conferences, peer group discussions, meetings

with local specialists, sponsored dinners and weekends. In addition, we usually have excellent access to the internet and television services.

However, the same cannot be said for those in rural and remote Australia. The majority of workshops, conferences and training events are held in metropolitan and inner regional locations. The time and expense required to attend makes these prohibitive to rural providers. In addition, many clinicians are the sole healthcare provider for their community, and getting cover for the time they are away just isn't possible.

Access to the internet is improving however it is still unreliable and intermittent in rural areas, with slow download speeds meaning that webstreaming is often not feasible due to buffering issues.

Since 1992, the Rural Health Education Foundation has been overcoming these access problems by producing a wide range of health education programs and resources, and making them freely available via satellite television and also available to webstream and podcast via our website www.rhef.com.au

Earlier this year, the Foundation invested in setting up the **Rural Health Channel** – a free-to-air, nationally available health TV channel that will be widely and regularly accessible to many thousands of health practitioners, patients, families and communities in rural and remote regions. The **Rural Health Channel** is being broadcast on the new Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) platform. VAST services provide digital TV to people who cannot receive terrestrial digital television and currently reach 75,000 households. Government estimates expect this number to grow to 250,000 by the end of 2013.

The channel, which began broadcasting on 21st May, will enable the Foundation's program to be accessible to a far greater number of clinicians – medical practitioners, nurses, allied health, and community health workers. Being able to watch topical and timely education programs in the comfort and convenience of your own home will significantly ease the burden of accessing training, and increase the likelihood of their regularly engaging with relevant and wide-ranging educational programs, increasing their knowledge and enhancing their skills.

Because the **Rural Health Channel** is a direct-to-home, free-to-air service, it can also be utilised to support patients, carers, families and whole communities in rural and remote areas. Improving health literacy and patient engagement is fundamental to improving health outcomes. Television is a very normal and accepted medium for accessing information and having a TV channel focused solely on health and wellbeing provides an opportunity to reach out to and connect with these communities in a way that is accepted, non-threatening, engaging and very cost-effective.

There is huge potential for the Rural Health Channel to make a significant difference to those living and working in rural and remote Australia, and thus deliver on the Foundation's vision of improved health outcomes for patients, communities and healthcare providers.

To do this, the Foundation continually works with organisations – government and non-government – to commission its education programs. Our programs are accredited for CPD points with a number

of professional organisations, such as RACGP, PSA, ACRRM and we have recently been able to extend our work into developing category 1 programs that can be completed online or via a printed version in conjunction with our television programs.

The **Rural Health Channel** is a conduit for government and not-for-profit health initiatives and communications to regularly and cost-effectively access those who are hardest to reach. Already Palliative Care Australia, Lifeline and the Heart Foundation are among the organisations that have used the channel to spread their health messages. Television is increasingly an interactive medium and the channel offers opportunities to connect with a variety of audiences:

Students; to ensure they are connected and supported in their early experiences of rural and remote practice, pivotal if they are to return and remain working in rural practice

Overseas trained doctors; whose first experience of Australian life is often rural and remote medicine, usually with no friends or connections in the area, and often very few associations or knowledge of the practicalities of Australia's health system

Health care providers; supporting their education and training needs throughout their career, reducing their personal and professional isolation

Patients; who actively seek support, information and engagement on how to help themselves with their condition, trauma or ongoing wellbeing; ensuring they have the same ease and breadth of access enjoyed by those living in metropolitan areas

Carers and families; often isolated and struggling to look after a family member or friend, and in dire need of support and information

Communities; seeking to improve the health and wellbeing of their community, and also seeking to support and retain their valued and cherished healthcare provider

Health Minister Tanya Plibersek said improving health care services for rural, regional and remote Australia is an important priority for the Gillard Government. *"Improving access to information on healthy lifestyles and reducing risks factors will make a significant difference in local communities. The Rural Health Education Foundation is making a real contribution to closing the gap between rural and urban Australia."*

We commend this Senate Inquiry and look forward to a continued drive from all sectors – government and non-government – to ensure improved equity of access for rural and remote areas, to improve the health outcomes for all those who live and work in these iconic Australian regions.

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