

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

It is 8.15 pm and I have been home from work in my medical practice in Scone for 30 minutes. The days are especially long this month as I am the only doctor providing obstetric services in our township which looks after about 13,000 people both from the town and the surrounding area. My only obstetric colleague is on a much needed holiday after major surgery two months ago. We are both in our late 50's and we are well aware that obstetric services in our town are in the death throes. I have been in this town for 17 years and there has been no new obstetric blood in that time.

Our partnership has also contracted. In the good old days, we had eight partners, but we are now down to three. We have a few part time assistants and a few registrars. It is a long time since our patients have been able to get an appointment with their doctor of choice and in fact they can't get an appointment with anyone inside of a couple of weeks. They simply have to wait in the queue to see the duty doctor who is also looking after the hospital patients. The wait can be in excess of 3 hours!

In the last 12 months we have interviewed at least 3 doctors and their families, who would be well suited to working and living in this lovely town in the upper Hunter Valley. Each however has telephoned us with the news that they have accepted a position in a larger coastal town with more schools and employment opportunities and no after hours work. With the ASGC-RA classification scheme providing similar incentives to work in large coastal resort towns as in our small inland town, it is hardly surprising.

When the new scheme was introduced by the labour Government, I knew there would be major repercussions. I wrote to the Honorable Nicola Roxon, who forwarded my letter (without reading it or responding to it) to our local member Joel Fitzgibbon. He telephoned me to say that the old scheme hadn't worked for his town of Cessnock and he wasn't about to recommend reversing things. He unfortunately failed to appreciate the rural workforce disaster that was looming.

You may be interested to know that the Scone doctors (who are all in the same practice) continue to provide 24/7 cover for our town. You may also be interested to know that on any given day we also provide after hours care for patients from surrounding towns where there is no doctor on call. As it becomes harder and harder to recruit doctors (due to poor government policy) our ability to continue to provide 24/7 emergency call will be tested.

Prior to moving to Scone, I worked in Paraburdoo in the remote Pilbara for 5 years. The mining companies have no trouble recruiting decent doctors – they pay them decent incentives.

The answer is really simple. Provide some decent incentives for doctors to relocate to rural areas where they are most needed. Provide some decent incentives for doctors to provide after hours care. Make it worthwhile for young doctors to consider a career in rural general practice. Ditch the current ASGC-RA system for providing incentives because it is deeply flawed.

Please feel free to contact me directly for further information if required. I am a procedural GP who has been working in rural towns since 1984. I have been Chair of our Rural Division of General Practice and I have also been president of the Rural Doctors Association of NSW. I am well qualified to speak further about the issues.

Kind regards

Peter McInerney MB BS (tas) FACRRM; FRACGP; DRANZCOG.