

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

As a rural GP of almost 20 years, I was alarmed to hear plans of changes to funding arrangements for after-hours medical services.

Although the lifestyle of a rural or remote GP is attractive in many ways, the after hours commitments required are significant and act as a great deterrent when attempting to recruit new doctors. Financial remuneration for such commitments is the only "carrot" we have to attract such people.

I understand that from July 2013, three federal Practice Incentive Payments that have supported rural practices to provide after-hours care will be discontinued, with the funding transferred to Medicare Locals. I do not believe that Medicare Locals – which will cover huge geographic areas – will be able to effectively support after-hours services for small rural communities. As such, I have grave concerns about the future of after-hours health provision in rural and remote regions of Australia.

Many doctors will view this as a "slap in the face" from the policy makers. In fact, many may consider no longer providing their longstanding after-hours service. This would be a disaster for communities.

Such a move is NOT an improvement in rural healthcare and needs to be urgently reconsidered.

Dr Louise Marsh