

**Submission
No 22**

**THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE No. 2
RECOMMENDATIONS RELATING TO WORKFORCE ISSUES, WORKPLACE
CULTURE AND FUNDING CONSIDERATIONS FOR REMOTE, RURAL AND
REGIONAL HEALTH**

Organisation: Pharmacy Guild of Australia (NSW Branch)

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4th September 2023

SUBMISSION

The implementation of Portfolio Committee No. 2 recommendations relating to workforce issues, workplace culture and funding considerations for remote, rural and regional health

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia NSW Branch (the Guild), welcomes the opportunity to provide suggestions on how to improve health outcomes in remote, rural, and regional New South Wales.

Community pharmacies are some of the most frequently accessed and accessible healthcare providers in Australia, with many pharmacies servicing communities that do not have access to a doctor or a hospital.

This submission addresses the implementation of the following recommendations:

- **Recommendation 8:** That the NSW Government investigate ways to support the growth and development of the primary health sector in rural, regional and remote areas, and support the sector's critical role in addressing the social determinants of health and reducing avoidable hospitalisations for the citizens of New South Wales.
- **Recommendation 11:** That NSW Health work with the Australian Government collaboratively to immediately invest in the development and implementation of a 10-Year Rural and Remote Medical and Health Workforce Recruitment and Retention Strategy.

Community pharmacies are not only an important component of existing healthcare infrastructure, but represent an opportunity to improve healthcare for thousands of patients across our state. Recently commenced scope of practice reforms have seen pharmacists across New South Wales authorised to administer a wider range of vaccines, deliver treatment for uncomplicated urinary tract infections (UTIs), and imminently providing repeat prescriptions of oral contraceptives. There is strong community support for these reforms, which could expand to include a range of 23 everyday health conditions such as asthma or nausea as has occurred in North Queensland.

Community pharmacy scope of practice reforms are an important opportunity to expand access to primary healthcare in regional New South Wales, offering patients an option to receive treatment without having to wait for a doctor's appointment or present to a hospital

New South Wales Branch

Suite 201, 10 Norbrik Drive, Bella Vista NSW 2153
Tel +61 2 9467 7100 • Fax +61 2 9467 7101
enquiries@nsw.guild.org.au
www.guild.org.au/nsw
ABN 87 740 877 429





emergency department. This will transform primary healthcare for the better, secure better patient health outcomes, and deliver a cost-saving to government.

However, making the most of this opportunity will require investment from government to strengthen the capacity of the regional pharmacy workforce. We make the following recommendations:

- To support the implementation of **Recommendation 8** and support the growth and development of the primary health sector in rural, regional, and remote areas, **we recommend that the statewide full scope of practice pharmacy pilot be implemented as soon as practicable, to create over 1,000 primary healthcare hubs across the state.**
- To support the implementation of **Recommendation 11** and improve the development and retention of a skilled rural and regional healthcare workforce, **we recommend that the Government implement a scheme to cover the cost of training to deliver full scope of practice for pharmacists who work in regional, rural, and remote areas.**

This submission contains details on these proposals and other workforce issues in regional New South Wales.

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PATIENT ACCESS TO PRIMARY HEALTHCARE IN REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES

Workforce issues are a driving factor in the inaccessibility of patient healthcare in regional New South Wales. The inaccessibility of primary healthcare in regional New South Wales has increased significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic and is exacerbating the existing inequality of health outcomes in regional and metropolitan areas.

Research commissioned by the Guild has found that 17% of patients in regional New South Wales are waiting three or more weeks on average to see a GP¹. This inaccessibility is forcing patients to present at hospital emergency departments instead, with 27% of all patients in regional New South Wales doing so in the past three years².

In stark opposition to this, access to pharmacy-based healthcare is still widespread across regional areas. Two-thirds of non-capital city residents Australia-wide live within 2.5km of a pharmacy³, and the average Australian visits a pharmacy eighteen times a year⁴. In many regional towns, there is a pharmacy but no doctor's clinic, making the local pharmacy an indispensable point of care.

Leveraging the accessibility of pharmacies by allowing pharmacists to work at their full scope of practice will create hundreds of new primary healthcare hubs in regional communities across the state and ease the burden on other sections of the healthcare workforce. Implementing scope of practice reform will generate a statewide time-saving benefit of 1.96 million consultations in primary care, 17,000 hours in emergency services, and 123,000 days in hospital care services per annum⁵. Furthermore, this reduced burden on the health system, along with the productivity gains it creates, will deliver a total dollar benefit of \$1.5 billion per annum to the NSW economy, and an annual savings to the government of \$78.7 million⁶.

Therefore, **we recommend that the statewide full scope of practice pilot be implemented as soon as practicable.**

¹ Insightfully, *Full Scope of Practice, Community Pharmacists – Opinion Research, NSW*, March 2023.

² Insightfully, *Full Scope of Practice*.

³ Pharmacy Guild of Australia, *Vital Facts on Community Pharmacy*, January 2023.

⁴ Pharmacy Guild, *Vital Facts*.

⁵ EY, *Scope of Practice Opportunity Assessment, 2021*.

⁶ EY, *Scope of Practice Opportunity Assessment, 2021*.

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STRENGTHENING THE REGIONAL PHARMACY WORKFORCE

Scope of practice reforms currently taking place in New South Wales represent an exciting opportunity to leverage the pharmacy workforce to improve patient access to healthcare in regional areas.

The first stages of these reforms have already seen greatly expanded access to primary care for patients. Patients can now receive a wider range of vaccines from their pharmacist, and women can seek treatment for uncomplicated UTIs. The latter program has already seen more than 1,600 patients treated across the state since it commenced in May 2023.

There is support for these reforms to be followed by a wider pilot, mirroring one currently taking place in North Queensland, under which pharmacists will provide treatment for a range of 23 everyday health conditions such as nausea, skin conditions and minor infections. Participating pharmacists are currently undertaking additional training to deliver services to patients when working at their full scope of practice.

In the Queensland pilot, this training is the equivalent of a Graduate Certificate, or six months of full-time postgraduate study, and includes 120 hours of supervised practice. This consists of two components: a course on safe prescribing and medicine use, and a course on the 23 conditions covered within the reforms. Australian universities have already begun to offer this training⁷, and it is anticipated that future graduates from pharmacy degrees will have this training built into their standard undergraduate education.

However, the existing pharmacy workforce will require this training to be able to provide these services. The training cost – approximately \$10,000 per student – will represent a significant cost barrier to undertaking this training. Given the sizeable benefits that expanded scope of practice will have to the workforce capacity of our regional healthcare system, and the savings to the NSW health system, efforts should be made to minimise these barriers.

We recommend that the Government implement a scheme to cover the cost of training for pharmacists who work in regional, rural, and remote areas. Similar policies are already in place across Australia, from the Commonwealth's Bonded Medical Places Scheme to the State Government's recently announced plan to provide scholarships to students in health degrees who commit to working in the public health system.

⁷ Queensland University of Technology, *Safe Prescribing and Quality Use of Medicines*.
<<https://professional-education.qut.edu.au/study/s/product/safe-prescribing-and-quality-use-of-medicines/01t8q00000F85OAAS>>.

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NSW Branch

This policy could mirror these programs, with the state government covering the cost of the training for pharmacists who commit to work in regional areas upon the completion of their course.

This would remove the cost barrier to undertaking this training for pharmacists who already work in regional areas, enhancing the capacity of the workforce to offer full scope of practice services to more areas sooner. Furthermore, it would create an incentive for pharmacists to move to rural and regional areas, further strengthening the existing rural workforce.

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ABOUT THE PHARMACY GUILD OF AUSTRALIA

The Guild is a national employers' organisation with over 90 years of experience in representing and promoting the value of the role of community pharmacy in the Australian health care system. Community pharmacies are a vital part of our national health system with the potential to make an even bigger contribution to the health of all Australians.

The Guild shares with the Federal Government responsibility for the implementation of the National Medicines Policy, as evidenced by successive Community Pharmacy Agreements (CPA) enshrined in the National Health Act 1953, including the current 7th CPA underpinned by the shared principles of:

- Stewardship of the health system and a shared responsibility for the stewardship of the PBS.
- Partnership in the implementation of Australia's National Medicines Policy.
- Stability and certainty of the Government's investment in the medicine supply chain, as well as timely availability of medicines through a well-distributed community pharmacy network.
- Integrity of Australia's health system, including patient safety and high value clinical care.

The Guild and the broader community pharmacy network have made significant contributions to the achievement of the National Medicines Policy objectives for patient outcomes, while at the same time enabling the ongoing (fiscal) stability of the PBS by working with successive Governments on budget savings measures.

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