

**Submission
No 412**

**INQUIRY INTO HEALTH OUTCOMES AND ACCESS TO
HEALTH AND HOSPITAL SERVICES IN RURAL,
REGIONAL AND REMOTE NEW SOUTH WALES**

Name: Mr Brian Jeffrey

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My first issue is that this process appears to have been a very well kept secret.

I have extensively lobbied our local member The Hon Kevin Anderson MP, The NSW Health Minister The Hon Brad Hazzard MP, and our local Member for Parkes The Hon Mark Coulton MP (who also happens to be the Federal Minister for Regional Health), about the shortages of GPs and hospital doctors in Gunnedah. Today (13 January 2021) is the first I have heard about this inquiry.

I have lived in Gunnedah for over 29 years. We have experienced many doctor shortages during this time but nothing as chronic as our present situation. At my last count the town had four GPs for a Shire population of about 12,000 residents. I understand that the WHO recommends one GP per 1,000 residents, so we are operating at one third of our needs. The local GPs have now closed their books so I am forced to travel a round trip of 160kms to Tamworth (our regional centre) for a routine repeat prescription consultation. If I am forced to make this trip in the future when I am feeling very sick I will be an accident waiting to happen on the Oxley Highway. What makes me angrier is that Gunnedah is blessed with an amazing Rural Health Centre which has become largely dysfunctional due to an absence of doctors. On top of their surgery patients, the local GPs are also expected to provide a service to the Emergency Department at Gunnedah Hospital. Their work load has become totally unrealistic.

I understand from press releases by the Member for Tamworth, that Gunnedah has been allocated \$50 million in the NSW budget for a hospital upgrade. It will be a total waste of taxpayers money (like the federally funded Rural Health Centre) if the government is unable to recruit doctors to staff the hospital. There appears to be a total lack of planning in this process.

I wish to make some suggestions:

1. In the medical profession there appears to be a view that market forces should work to ensure the provision of medical practitioners. In rural and regional areas this does not work. Other professions like the police and teaching have incentive measures to guarantee a supply of qualified professionals in hard to staff areas. This must be acknowledged and the government must take responsibility for the provision of doctors if we are to adequately staff medical practices and hospitals in rural areas.
2. In my correspondence with my local MPs at State and Federal level it appears that both are able to blame each other for doctor shortages (although the Member for Parkes claims that there is not a shortage!). There must be a clear demarcation of government responsibility. The supply of doctors in rural areas must be either a federal or state duty. If both are involved a crack appears and the problem can be concealed and unresolved (as is happening in Gunnedah at present).
3. Gunnedah Hospital should be staffed by full-time doctors. When demand for services is low, these doctors could take the overflow from patients unable to get an appointment that day with their local GP.

4. The government must increase the financial incentives for doctors in rural areas. I understand that it takes a decade for a GP to be fully trained but fully funded generous medical scholarships should be offered to students who agree to practice in rural areas for a number of years. This would increase the number of medical students and help to take the pressure off the system. For students already training the government should pay off the huge HECS debt of junior doctors who agree to work in rural areas for a number of years.

5. The Gunnedah community should have access to the same basic health services as the residents of Sydney. At present we do not and there is a strong local feeling that we are being serviced by a Sydney State government.

This submission is not as comprehensive as I would have liked, but I appreciate the importance of meeting the response deadline.

Thank you for taking the time to read my views on the subject.