

**Submission
No 572**

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

Organisation: Macquarie Health Collective

Date Received: 15 January 2021



15th January 2021

Hon. Greg Donnelly MLC
Chair
Portfolio Committee No. 2 – Health

To the Hon. Greg Donnelly,

Re: The Inquiry into Health Outcomes and Services in Rural, Regional, and Remote NSW

Macquarie Health Collective is a Medical and Allied Health Practice located in Dubbo NSW. We are a team of GPs, Medical Specialists, and Allied Health Providers servicing Dubbo and Regional NSW. Our goal is to provide collaborative and innovative healthcare to Dubbo and Regional NSW in an attempt to bridge the gap in accessing high quality healthcare that has historically been a concern for Regional NSW. Dubbo currently has a population of approximately 40,000 people; however as services remain limited west of Dubbo, Dubbo functions as a major healthcare hub for regional NSW. The population within the Western NSW Local Health District is estimated to exceed 280,000 people.

To-date, the LHD and local Non-Government Organisations have had difficulty recruiting medical and allied health providers. It is well known that difficulties with access to health services contributes to poorer health outcomes. As a well-established private practice already servicing Regional NSW, we aim to work in partnership with these organisations to assist in strengthening the current healthcare service delivery in Regional NSW. We propose that innovative models of healthcare, and collaborative partnerships across organisations, may assist in providing a solution to some of the current barriers to healthcare in Regional NSW.

Collaborative Pathways

Recent meetings with representatives of the LHD have allowed early discussions around the potential for a collaborative approach to recruitment, and to service delivery in rural and remote communities. Examples of partnership opportunities could include doctors being able to work across the public and private sector within Dubbo, allowing for private consulting

opportunities, as well as hospital based work. The \$275 million redevelopment of Dubbo Base Hospital will require a strengthening of the medical workforce. As recruitment to medical positions at Dubbo Base Hospital has not always been possible, a partnership similar to that described above may open up additional opportunities for city based doctors considering a relocation to Regional NSW.



A further example of a collaborative pathway could be an opportunity for doctors to work privately in Dubbo, but also provide services into hospitals or GP practices in rural and remote locations. A barrier previously identified in recruitment to rural and remote locations is the isolation experienced by professionals. If a provider was able to base themselves in Dubbo and then provide outreach services, we may be able to overcome some of these barriers. A position in Dubbo allows them to join a well-established team of colleagues for professional support, rather than having to work as a solo provider. Living in Dubbo allows greater access to services within the community, another barrier faced in relocating doctors to rural and remote communities. Dubbo provides affordable housing, employment opportunity for spouses, and a variety of public and private schools for children. There are campuses for Charles Sturt University and The University of Sydney so that professionals can remain connected to professional networks and supports, as well as training opportunities. Strategies to utilise the potential of Dubbo to strengthen the services available in rural and remote locations seems to warrant consideration.

Telehealth

Throughout Covid-19, an area of service delivery that has certainly strengthened is our Telehealth pathways. The escalation of models for how Telehealth is utilised has revolutionised healthcare, particularly for Regional NSW. Throughout 2020, a considerable proportion of our services, both medical and allied health, were provided via Telehealth. We continue to now provide face-to-face and Telehealth options for patients, allowing options for families, and removing the barrier of travel that so many families in Regional NSW have long faced. Prior to the provision of Telehealth services, we had families driving 4 hours each way to access our providers, something that became exceptionally challenging during the lengthy drought we have experienced in recent years. Telehealth has allowed us to remove the barrier of travel, optimising health outcomes for people in Regional NSW, particularly those located in remote and farming communities.

While a number of Telehealth organisations have emerged in metropolitan locations offering services to Regional NSW, regional families often report comfort in engaging with regional services, who they feel may be better able to identify with their unique rural needs. We propose that strengthening the face-to-face and Telehealth services of larger centres such as Dubbo is an important step in bridging the gap in access to healthcare in Regional NSW.



Mental Health Services

As the Director of Macquarie Health Collective, I am also a Registered Psychologist, and continue to practice in a clinical capacity with regional families. I lead a team of Psychologists and Clinical Psychologists. Our organisation has a significant mental health focus, with mental health services currently being provided collaboratively by our GPs and Psychologists, in conjunction with our Medical Specialists and other Allied Health providers. One of the key targets for our organisation is to continue to improve upon our delivery of mental health services across Regional NSW, utilising both face-to-face and Telehealth services.

Palliative Care Services

Another of our identified key targets within our organisation is to strengthen the range of palliative care services we provide to the community. Some of our GPs and our Clinical Psychologist have particular interests in palliative care. Again, we feel collaborative pathways with other organisations is crucial in improving access to these services. We are in early discussions with organisations such as the PHN and Dubbo Area Nursing Service to develop innovative models and pathways of care.

Collaborative Pathways with Government

As outlined in this submission, recruitment to healthcare positions in Regional NSW has long been a problem, and previous models to improve access to healthcare have not yet proven successful. We propose that a more collaborative pathway, including connections with the private health sector, may provide a viable solution. To-date, much of the communication that has driven policy development has come from the Government and Non-Government sector. We would like to provide a voice for the private sector of healthcare in Regional NSW. We believe we have unique insights and opportunities to contribute to these discussions.

Further to this, historically many of the funding models have primarily incorporated the provision of services via Government and Non-Government organisations. As previously discussed with Hon. Mark Coulton, MP and Minister for Regional Health, we feel that private practices have considerable potential to contribute to the provision of services in Regional NSW. As a well-established regional practice, we understand the needs of our local community, and already have a breadth of services available that we can continue to build upon in strengthening the rural medical workforce. We are actively working with other organisations as outlined above to build collaborative and innovative partnerships. If Government funding was available to support these models, we feel our potential to support the community would be greatly increased.

At present in regional NSW, considerable funding is allocated to VMO services. While important, these services are costly and transient, and therefore do not adequately support the

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long-term health needs of the community. Private practices, such as Macquarie Health Collective, are strongly positioned to provide additional services in rural NSW. We would strongly support the funding and development of public-private partnerships and innovative models of care that provide sustainable and local solutions for service delivery.



We trust this information provides a unique and useful perspective of the needs of Regional NSW from those currently involved in the healthcare delivery. We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss any of the matters raised. We are incredibly grateful that the commission has been established to shine a light on such an important issue for regional NSW, and look forward to hearing the outcome.

Kind Regards,

Tanya Forster
Macquarie Health Collective