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Make 2023 the ‘Year of Thinking Outside the Box’ on rural health, doctors urge

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) is urging governments and policy-makers to make 2023 the ‘Year of Thinking Outside the Box’ on funding and training models needed to underpin a sustainable future for rural general practice.

RDAA’s call comes against a continuing decline in Medicare bulk-billing rates, and an ongoing shortage of junior doctors seeking to undertake General Practice or Rural Generalist training in rural locations.

“With the new Federal Government in place, there is a real opportunity in 2023 to re-shape the current funding model for primary care in Australia, and move away from the federal-state blame game that has dogged healthcare delivery for decades” **RDAA President, Dr Megan Belot, said.**

“Particularly for rural healthcare, we have to be open-minded about a change in funding models, where perhaps we see a combination of fee-for-service funding as well as block funding to help underpin a more sustainable model of rural general practice.

“Many rural general practices are struggling to stay afloat given the additional costs of providing general practice care in the bush, and in many communities there is just not the same level of income to enable practices to bill patients for the real cost of their healthcare – the risk in doing so is that patients will not be able to afford to get the care they need.

“But at the same time, this is undermining our ability to sustain general practice services in many communities.

“We want to look not only at sustainable funding models for rural general practice care, but also sustainable health workforce models to help underpin health service delivery in the bush – models that will deliver not just doctors to the bush, but nurses and allied health providers as well.

“We have welcomed the commitment of Federal Health Minister, Mark Butler MP, to healthcare reform as Chair of the Strengthening Medicare Taskforce – this is the key group where funding options will be explored and recommendations will be provided.

“We have welcomed the consultative approach taken on future models of rural healthcare funding and GP training, and we continue to have productive discussions with members of the Taskforce about the options available.

“General practice already plays an important role in coordinating healthcare, particularly in the bush, and we believe this should be retained.

“But to do so effectively into the future, we need to deliver funding models for rural general practices that at least ensures their financial survival.

“Additionally, we need to be training more junior doctors in rural and remote settings...as this remains the other critical factor in whether we will see rural general practice survive in the future.





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“While undoubtedly there is an overall shortage of junior doctors wanting to go into general practice across the board, it is the rural GP training places that are not being taken up by junior doctors and are consistently under-subscribed.

“So while there is still a need for funding models that underpin sustainable rural general practice, we also need investment in rural GP and Rural Generalist training pathways – because one approach without the other will not fix the issue.

“We look forward to continuing to work with the federal and state governments, their health departments and the Strengthening Medicare Taskforce in 2023, in an effort to bring about practical solutions that will make a big difference in the sustainability of rural healthcare into the future.”

**A high resolution photo of Dr Megan Belot is [available here](#).
The above photo in lower res (online use) is [available here](#).**

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