



Australian Government



Joint Communiqué

Bilateral Regional Health Forum

3 October 2023

A Bilateral Regional Health Forum, co-chaired by the Australian Government's Assistant Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention and Assistant Minister for Rural and Regional Health, the Hon Emma McBride MP, and the New South Wales Minister for Health and Minister for Regional Health, the Hon Ryan Park, MP discussed joint interests in rural and regional mental health and suicide prevention, aged care, innovative workforce models, and virtual care in NSW. Discussions were held on the importance of sustainable residential aged care in regional and rural communities. Minister Park raised that there are difficulties for NSW Health in discharging older people who are waiting for a residential aged care bed, when clinically ready to leave hospital.

Assistant Minister McBride emphasised the work being undertaken to enhance and expand the Multi-Purpose Service (MPS) model and consideration of the aged care reforms for MPS, development of responses to thin or failing markets and approaches to improving the discharge of patients to residential aged care facilities. The Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care and NSW Health have commenced joint planning sessions to better understand the future demand and priorities for new and existing MPS sites and support a collaborative approach for rural and remote locations.

The NSW Minister for Mental Health, the Hon. Rose Jackson MLC participated for the discussion on mental health and suicide prevention. Minister Jackson and Assistant Minister McBride recognised that there are significant challenges in mental health and suicide prevention in regional NSW. The NSW Government is concerned about the drought in the regions and the effect on the community's mental health. Ongoing collaboration between the NSW Government and the Australian Government is essential to ensure that mental health services and support are provided to communities experiencing the impacts of natural disasters. Both Governments have agreed to further explore the use of virtual care for mental health care.

Attracting and retaining the health workforce has been a longstanding challenge in rural and regional NSW. Minister Park thanked the Australian Government for supporting 3 trials of the Single Employer Model in NSW, with up to 80 Rural Generalist Single Employer Pathway training posts over the four-year trial.

There was also joint support for the expansion of the Collaborative Care program dependent on the outcomes of the scalability assessment and program evaluation underway.

NSW Health discussed innovative examples of ongoing workforce collaboration between local health districts and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs).

NSW Health sought support from the Australian Government to be involved in discussions on a shared Aboriginal Health Practitioner model between NSW Health and ACCHOs.

It was noted that the Department of Health and Aged Care is also working on reviewing Sections 19AA and 19AB of the *Health Insurance Act 1973* (the Act), Distribution Priority Area (DPA) classification, District of Workforce Shortage (DWS) and Monash Modified Model (MMM). This work will contribute to the development of a comprehensive direction to sustain health and related services, and availability of the workforce they require.

The Ministers acknowledged that expanded access of remote patient monitoring to General Practitioners and primary care services will offer significantly improved opportunities for integration across healthcare settings and improve outcomes for patients. Minister Park also noted that NSW Health is exploring community hubs for patients to have virtual care appointments to overcome connectivity issues. Minister Park canvassed support for the NSW Government to partner with the Australian Government on a community hub model which could also include online access to other government services, such as ServiceNSW or Centrelink.

Minister Park highlighted the issue that doctors employed in NSW Health services are not currently able to issue subsidised medication virtually due to a lack of a Pharmaceutical Reform Agreement (PRA) between the Australian Government and NSW Government.

The Australian Government noted that PRAs are currently being reviewed and expressed support to investigate interim solutions which would allow virtual doctors who support residents in MPS to electronically prescribe Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) medications, while the capacity is developed within the NSW electronic medication management system.

Ministers committed to continuing dialogue on these priority areas with the next Bilateral Regional Health Forum to be held in mid-2024.