Future of rural maternity services under threat

Rural maternity services are struggling because the Victorian funding model favours high-volume metropolitan hospitals, according to Victorian Healthcare Association Chief Executive Officer Trevor Carr.

Rural maternity services are provided by 40 public health services and five private hospitals, with a further seven health services providing local pregnancy and post-natal care.

Maternity services are mostly funded through Victoria’s activity-based funding model. Mr Carr said cost weights applied to maternity services were heavily skewed towards high-volume major metropolitan hospitals, making low-volume rural maternity services less viable.

"The gap between revenue and the cost of service provision is inconsistent with the State Government’s Rural directions for a better state of health and its regional development policy aims,” Mr Carr said.

"Rural areas with no maternity services are a less attractive living option for couples wanting to start a family, which has a negative impact on local population growth."

The State Government’s Rural Maternity Initiative (RMI) funded 27 health services to implement new models of care in their communities.

Mr Carr said the RMI showed how locally-focused programs could deliver healthy outcomes for local communities. He said the RMI model should be used to guide the development of a statewide maternity services plan.

The VHA is calling for more government investment in rural health infrastructure to ensure future capacity.

"The 27 per cent of Victorians who live in rural and remote areas continue to experience inequitable access to public healthcare,” Mr Carr said.

"The government must skew infrastructure renewal funding towards rural centres over the next decade to underpin regional development and support population health improvements over time.”

The VHA is the major peak body representing the public healthcare sector in Victoria. Our members include public hospitals, rural and regional health services, community health services and aged care facilities. Established since 1938, the VHA promotes improvement of health outcomes for all Victorians from the perspective of its members.

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