



Victorian Healthcare Association



RURAL EMERGENCY SERVICES FUNDING IN VICTORIA

The Victorian Healthcare Association is the major peak body representing the interests of the public healthcare sector in Victoria. Our members are public hospitals, rural and regional health services, community health services and aged care facilities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2007, rural and regional VHA member agencies highlighted concerns about increasing costs associated with providing emergency services. These services face workforce shortages and the absence of a cohesive and systemic funding framework based on population need. This is compounded by variable access to after-hours GP services and the mental, financial and social impacts of drought.

To address the pressing need to provide urgent care services in rural regions, further work is required to refine the health system. Significant workforce pressures exist in filling medical on-call rosters across rural Victoria. In many cases, medical staff are reconsidering their ability to continue in their roles. If local doctors withdraw from local on-call rosters, significant safety concerns will be felt in local communities and employee stress within services. This will amplify increased presentations to local health services for emergency departments.

Rural emergency service provision requires a systematic and strategic approach to ensure services can provide urgent and emergency care that is both a sustainable and high quality.

THE VHA'S POSITION

To overcome difficulties in the management of emergency care in rural areas, the VHA believes a key to success is appropriate funding arrangements and public education. The level of funding provided for acute services is currently insufficient to meet the full costs of maintaining and operating these services. In addition, the VHA supports the reorientation of the health system towards health promotion, primary healthcare and population health approaches to improve health outcomes for the broader community and prevent emergency presentations in the first place. Public education campaigns are needed to highlight the difficulties of providing emergency services in rural and regional

RURAL EMERGENCY FUNDING

Immediate action is required to address the demand, workforce and funding issues rural health services face in the provision of emergency services. To ensure sustainability of these services, a new funding formula must take into account access and proximity to other emergency and after-hours medical services. This formulae must also address the diverse demand issues experienced in high population growth areas and in holiday/weekend destinations. The implementation of a data collection system is required across all health services—whether or not they have designated 24 hour emergency departments to collect data on the numbers of emergency presentations to their services. Improved data collection will underpin the development of a new funding framework for emergency and urgent care services across rural Victoria that reflects the true cost of provision of these services.

If health services do not receive the support and funding required to address these issues, local communities will be negatively affected. Inaction will lead to both the loss of practitioners and services as health services use their available funds to meet the cost of emergency care. The ability of health services to focus on primary healthcare and preventative health strategies is depleted when the emergency service needs are so pressing.

The Victorian Healthcare Association

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ACCESS TO SERVICES

There is increasing pressure on emergency departments, with 51 percent of emergency department presentations in rural areas being for primary care type services (DHS, 2007). These presentations occur more frequently in the evening and on weekends. As the collection of data in urgent care and primary care centres is not as robust as in designated emergency departments, it is difficult to quantify the exact causes of these presentations across rural Victoria.

Research conducted by Jennings et al (2006) states that improving health outcomes in rural areas requires improvements in each link of the "chain of survival".

The VHA seeks to promote strategies to enhance and bolster the work already being undertaken in Victoria. Current funding arrangements for emergency care across rural Victoria are unsustainable and action is required to ensure community safety and equity across all services.

"Each event brings different issues. The bike rides bring dehydration and musculo-skeletal injuries, schoolies weeks brings mass intoxication, cuts and trauma and music festivals bring overdoses and assaults"

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The VHA recommends the development of a comprehensive plan to for addressing the on-call crisis being experienced across rural Victoria by improving community access to appropriate primary health care services.

This must include dedicated funding and structures to facilitate the systematic use of telemedicine to support clinicians in rural health services.

2. The VHA recommends that a strategic review of emergency services provision in Victoria be undertaken. This review must address the issues impacting service sustainability including:

- Access and proximity to other emergency services and after-hours medical services
- Demand issues experienced in high population growth areas and weekend/holiday destinations
- Costs borne by health services into the provision of urgent and emergency services

The VHA proposes that "a funding initiative similar to the state-wide Maternity Initiative be developed, providing grants to health services to support them in developing local service delivery solutions.

3. The VHA recommends that industry agreement be sought and systems implemented for data collection systems for all emergency, urgent and primary care centres across Victoria to ensure a consistent approach for presentations

4. The VHA recommends a plan which:

- Addresses significant workforce issues facing rural Victoria that assists which services to recruit and retain a sustainable workforce
- Addresses the issues associated with the maintenance of "currency of practice" requirements for nursing staff, including funding and articulation of strategies for maintaining clinical practice

5. That DHS partners Ambulance Victoria and Rural Health Services to investigate the role ambulance services can play in service provision

The full position statement and references are available on the VHA website: <http://www.vha.org.au>



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