

Monday, October 20 2008



For immediate release

Review needed for rural Victorian emergency services

A strategic review of emergency services provision in Victoria is needed to safeguard the availability, sustainability and quality of 24-hour care at rural health services, a peak public health body has warned.

The Victorian Healthcare Association's (VHA) latest position statement – ***Rural Emergency Services Funding in Victoria*** – calls on the Victorian government to review rural emergency services to address multiple pressures these services currently face.

At present, larger regional health services with 24-hour emergency departments receive dedicated emergency service funding, whereas smaller rural health services must utilise funds from their acute department budgets.

The VHA's chief executive officer, Mr Trevor Carr, said the review is urgently needed at a time of critical shortages of after hour's general practitioners (GPs) that is already overburdening the rural health system.

Mr Carr said the review must consider:

- 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 in the provision of urgent and emergency services

"The level of funding provided to acute services is currently insufficient to meet the full costs of maintaining and operating these services," Mr Carr said.

"Current funding arrangements for emergency care across rural Victoria are unsustainable and action is required to ensure community safety and equity across all services."

Central to the review should be an investigation into the use of a standardised system of data collection and increased investment in telemedicine to overcome workforce shortages in rural areas.

The impact of tourism events on rural Victoria also requires government attention with events such as "Schoolies Week" in Lorne and huge population shifts over peak holiday periods further straining the budgets of rural health services.

Data collection currently occurs in designated emergency service departments across rural Victoria, but does not occur on any consistent basis in smaller facilities that offer urgent and primary care.

Mr Carr said this situation requires remedying to enable better service delivery planning and monitoring of emergency department presentations.

To safeguard the skills and quality of care at rural health services, the VHA recommends a renewed focus on workforce issues in rural Victoria.

One major issue confronting rural health services is how to maintain the "currency of practice" skills of their nursing and clinical staff to ensure they have the range of skills needed for emergency medicine.

Monday, October 20 2008



Smaller health services rely on an on-call roster of GPs to provide emergency services backed by nursing staff that require a high level of generalist skills in order to stabilise patients, even if those skills are used rarely.

One solution, proposed by the VHA is that the Department of Human Services (DHS) provides long-term individual grants for health services to develop local solutions to suit their communities' needs.

The grants could work similarly to the State-wide Maternity Initiative that allowed health services to come up with local solutions to deal with a shortage of obstetrics services. Grants could be used to fund training of existing staff or to develop new service models that use existing resources more sustainably.

The VHA is the peak advocacy body representing public healthcare interests in Victoria. Its members include public hospitals, rural and regional health services, community health services and aged care facilities.

A full copy of the **Rural Emergency Services** position statement is available at the VHA's website: www.vha.org.au.

For further information and interviews, contact
Trevor Carr
CEO
The Victorian Healthcare Association
(03) 9094 7777 or (0409) 362 382

