

Tuesday, 6 May 2008



Victorian Healthcare Association

For immediate release

Budget focus on rural health welcome – Victorian Healthcare Association says

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Rural Victoria will gain significant funds for public healthcare infrastructure in a bid to address the systemic health disadvantages faced by rural Victorians.

Victorian Healthcare Association (VHA) chief executive Trevor Carr said the \$135 million country health package in yesterday's state budget will fund major capital works promised in the 2006 state election.

VHA welcomed major commitments to rural health including \$70 million for stage two of South West Healthcare's Warrnambool Hospital redevelopment; \$9.5 million for Bendigo Hospital's emergency department; \$21 million for a new Latrobe Community Health Service building in Morwell and funding for 18 new dental chairs in Wodonga and Mildura.

However, despite a budget boost for obstetrics services in metropolitan Melbourne to meet Victoria's baby boom rural Victorians continued to face diminishing availability of obstetrics services, despite the Rural Maternity Initiative, Mr Carr said.

Ballarat Hospital received \$5.5 million for its mental health adult acute unit and there was a commitment to a 24-hour statewide mental health information line, similar to the Nurse on Call system. However, Mr Carr said lack of access to mental health services remained a significant problem in rural Victoria.

Particularly pleasing is the Victorian government's \$20 million commitment over four years to target preventative health by extending the Early Intervention in Chronic Disease program (EICD) in rural Victoria and expanding the Victorian Population Health Survey (VPHS) to include local government areas data on risk factors every three years.

The EICD program is a model of preventative health funding that aims to reduce the rates of hospital admissions for people living with chronic illnesses.

"It is pleasing that the State Government is beginning to adopt a population health approach to public healthcare planning," Mr Carr said.

"Preventing chronic disease is critical to avoid further strain on an already over-stretched public health system, with up to 32 per cent of admissions to acute services due to preventable illness."

"VHA has consistently supported the need for a population health approach which provides funding to change individual behaviours - thereby lowering the risk of them becoming patients," Mr Carr said.

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A new National Centre for Farmer Health in Hamilton also received \$2.4 million in state government funding in a partnership programme with Deakin University and the Helen and Geoff Handbury Trust.

The centre will be co-located with the Western District Health Service which runs the Sustainable Farm Families initiative that won a VHA Award in 2007 in the "Population Health" category.

Improving the health and well-being of farmers, their families and employees will be the aim of the centre that will also serve as a research hub for doctor training and international expertise in agricultural health.

Mr Carr said it is community-based programmes that focus on local and preventative solutions to rural health concerns that will have the greatest impact in reducing rates of chronic disease among rural Victorians.

He said rural Victorians continue to experience poorer health outcomes compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008 report on rural, regional and remote health found life expectancy in regional areas is 1-2 years lower than in major cities and rates of acute or chronic injury are also higher in country areas. Country males are also more likely to show high levels of psychological distress.

On the workforce front, a commitment to recruit an extra 592 general nurses and train an extra 221 doctors each year to meet shortages, particularly in rural areas, is most welcome as is the restructure of the Rural Ambulance Service and the employment of 20 dedicated off roster rural/regional paramedics, Mr Carr said.

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

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