

CWA of NSW Awareness Week 1 - 8 September 2018



Media Release

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Country NSW sick of second-class treatment when it comes to health care

The widening gap between health care services in country communities and those in metropolitan centres is the focus of a major new campaign by the Country Women's Association (CWA) of NSW. Health care inequalities will be the focus of this year's CWA of NSW Awareness Week, which launches on Saturday, September 1, with the organisation preparing to expose the increasing disparity between the city and the bush when it comes to health care access and affordability.

"The ongoing erosion of health care services in rural and regional areas is a serious issue, but for too long concerns have been ignored, forcing many communities to the brink of a health care crisis," said CWA of NSW President Annette Turner.

"Seven million Australians live outside our major cities, but when it comes to allocating health funding, this level of representation doesn't seem to count for much. People in country Australia want to know government at all levels is serious about allocating the expertise and resources required to come up with some genuine solutions to the health care challenges country areas face."

This year's Awareness Week campaign calls for action on a number of key areas:

- shortage of general practitioners (GPs) in rural and regional areas;
- difficulty recruiting specialists, specialist nurses and allied health care professionals;
- poor access to dental care;
- shortage of drug and alcohol support and rehabilitation services;
- shortage of mental health services;
- lack of support (psychological) for those with chronic or terminal illness in rural areas and their families/carers;
- downgrading of local hospitals, including inconsistencies in the approach to blood products at many smaller NSW hospitals.

According to a 2017 Medical Journal of Australia report, access to medical specialists in major cities stood at 162.1 full-time equivalent specialists per 100 000 population, but diminished significantly for people living in inner or outer regional (82.7 and 61.5 per 100 000 respectively) and remote areas (34.2 per 100 000).¹

The latest *Pillars of Communities* report² revealed that between 1981 and 2011, the percentage of small towns with a dentist dropped from an already low nine per cent to just five per cent. And, a 2015 Royal

¹ Belinda G O'Sullivan, Johannes U Stoelwinder and Matthew R McGrail, *Med J Aust* 2017; 207 (3): 98-99.

Flying Doctors Service report showed cavities in country children were 55 per cent higher than city children, with almost 40 per cent of adults in the bush suffering untreated tooth decay, compared to less than a quarter in the city.

“We know from the National Rural Health Alliance that people in rural, regional and remote Australia access medical services at half the rate; medical specialists at a third of the rate; and mental health and allied health professionals at a quarter the rate of those in metropolitan Australia. This all comes down to availability, and ultimately it means poorer health outcomes for country Australians,” Annette said.

“It also means a serious hit to the hip pocket when they need these services and must travel away for the assessments and treatment they require. It must also be stressed that when we’re talking about health care deficiencies, we’re including significant regional centres that in many cases have limited or no access to the help their residents need.”

Richard Colbran, Chief Executive Officer of the NSW Rural Doctors Network, appreciates the healthcare challenges facing rural and regional communities.

“Everyone in NSW, no matter where they live, deserves access to quality healthcare,” he said.

“Part of our role at RDN is to show doctors working in cities, those relocating from overseas, and the next generation coming through medical schools, that working and living in rural and regional NSW is a rewarding career choice.

“We know that financial support, education and training, and succession planning are key to health professionals remaining in country areas. We also work with organisations like the CWA of NSW to provide the social support that helps create a rich and rewarding bush lifestyle.

“However, the sector must continually reflect and innovate to continue to bridge the gap between city and country services.”

Access to drug and alcohol rehab facilities outside metropolitan centres has also been a source of concern, and last September a NSW Upper House inquiry was established to investigate the provision of rehabilitation services in regional, rural and remote NSW. It followed the release of figures by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre that revealed the number of deaths relating to methamphetamine use had doubled in seven years – between 2009 and 2015 - with nearly half of those in regional Australia.

NSW-ACT Rural Woman of the Year finalist Shanna Whan is one woman successfully tackling rural alcohol addiction amongst her peers and professionals who she has identified as a “hugely at-risk” and yet “invisible” group increasingly slipping through the cracks of an inadequate health care model.

Shanna has been a tireless ambassador in this area since successfully recovering from a long battle with alcoholism four years ago. Through her platform Sober in the Country she is connecting her rural and regional peers and opening up a long overdue discussion about what 'alcoholism' actually looks like, with the aim of effective prevention and education in this complex area.

“We still have huge barriers in the form of stigmas, stereotypes, and we still glorify alcohol abuse at every opportunity. Because of this - those small few who are brave enough to recognise a problem and ask for help find that adequate support services are either unaffordable, non-existent or out of reach,” Shanna said.

² Bourne, K., Nash, A., Houghton, K. (2017) Pillars of communities: Service delivery professionals in small Australian towns 1981 – 2011. The Regional Australia Institute.

Annette said lobbying for improved health care services across country NSW had always been a major focus for the CWA of NSW and it was a fight they were willing to continue for as long as it took.

“This Awareness Week we want our policy-makers to know those in rural and regional NSW are sick of the health care inequalities that still exist – and which are getting worse in many cases – and want real solutions that initiate real change in these communities.”

Ends

For further information or to arrange an interview with Annette Turner or Awareness Week partners and ambassadors, contact:

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