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## **WHY DO WE HAVE A DOCTOR SHORTAGE**

The South West is suffering from a chronic shortage of doctors, but unfortunately this is not something new. There has always been a lack of doctors living and working outside of Australian cities. Any system that takes medical students and puts them through six or more years of training in the middle of a capital city is always going to struggle to encourage them to leave this environment and head for the bush.

This is why today over 40% of GPs currently working in rural and remote Western Australia have received their primary medical qualification from overseas. Part of the visa requirements of overseas trained doctors is to do 3 – 5 years in what the government calls an 'Area of Unmet Need' before they are allowed to practise in Perth.

This system works well in ensuring that rural areas get access to doctors unless of course you live in Bunbury. Unfortunately it seems the bureaucrats in Canberra that make these decisions cannot read maps, according to them the city of Bunbury has plenty of doctors but Greater Bunbury eg Eaton and Australind suffers from a lack of them. This completely ignores the fact that people from the whole of the Bunbury Wellington region will travel into the centre of Bunbury to get access to a doctor.

Anyone who has called around looking for an appointment at one of the city medical practices would know that there is a serious shortage of doctors.

There is something fundamentally wrong with our primary health care system when the Federal Government cannot ensure that a regional centre such as ours does not have access to sufficient numbers of GPs. Today 27% of Australians live outside of the capital cities but they receive only 21% of the total spend on medicare rebates and worse are served by just 15% of the medical workforce. The end result is country areas experience 20% higher mortality rates from all causes with lower survival for cardiovascular diseases and cancer. This is not just happening in remote areas of Australia it is happening in regional centres like Bunbury. The problem begins with a lack of access to primary health care which impacts on the all important potential of early diagnosis.

This is not only unjust and unfair it is also unnecessary. Rural and remote Australia remains medically under supplied and under financed relative to the capital cities and it's about to get a lot worse in our region. Being one of the fastest growing areas of Australia and one that is attracting a high percentage of retirees the local demand for medical services is about to explode. There is no reason why local residents in such a major regional centre should not be able to expect the same level of basic medical services that are available in Perth.

The federal government needs to focus more on providing practical solutions to help reduce this imbalance. For instance they need to recognise Bunbury as an area of unmet need, this would allow local GP practices to recruit skilled overseas trained doctors and shorten waiting lists. They should also move to increase the total number of medical places on offer at Universities with a particular focus on attracting students that are likely to want to work in regional areas along with expanding the rural bonded scholarships scheme. The one positive move that the government has done recently is to decentralise some of the medical school training out to regional hospitals such as Bunbury but for this to be successful these students need to come away with a positive experience issues such as poor accommodation options and limited training need to be addressed. Taken together these changes will produce more doctors and hopefully eventually help overcome our doctor shortage.