



**THE HON MARK COULTON MP**

Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications and Local Government  
Federal Member for Parkes

Professor Ruth Stewart  
National Rural Health Commissioner  
NRHC@health.gov.au

Dear Professor Stewart

Congratulations on your appointment as National Rural Health Commissioner. The Australian Government is strongly committed to improving access to health services in rural and remote areas and views the Office of the National Rural Health Commissioner as an important and valuable resource to support and advise on key rural health reforms, particularly related to the implementation of the rural health policy agenda. I am pleased to provide you with the Statement of Expectations for the term of your appointment.

This Statement of Expectations, and the provision of a Statement of Intent in response, are key elements of sound governance for Australian Government bodies. Your Statement of Intent should outline how you plan to deliver on the activities outlined in the Statement of Expectations.

These documents are valuable tools for increasing transparency and accountability, as well as ensuring well-defined responsibilities and clear relationships between statutory appointees and other arms of government. The Statement of Expectations and your response complement the requirements for the National Rural Health Commissioner as set out in Part VA of the *Health Insurance Act 1973*.

In the interest of public accountability, both the Statement of Expectations and the Statement of Intent are to be published on the Office of the National Rural Health Commissioner website.

I acknowledge your Office requires flexibility to respond to emerging strategic priorities, while continuing to deliver a strong program of practical outcomes. I would like to have regular discussions around your proposed forward program of activities.

I look forward to receiving your response and working with you to improve rural health outcomes.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Coulton', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

**Mark Coulton MP**

Encl: (1)

# STATEMENT OF EXPECTATIONS FOR THE NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH COMMISSIONER

1 JULY 2020 – 30 JUNE 2022

## VISION

Improving regional, rural and remote health is a priority for the Australian Government. The Office of the National Rural Health Commissioner plays a key role in assisting the Government to improve health outcomes in rural, regional and remote Australia, particularly in relation to improving the quality and sustainability of, and access to, health services and professionals in these areas.

Nearly eight million people choose to live outside Australia's cities. The Government values these communities and the enormous contribution they make to our national economy. The Government's commitment to a thriving regional, rural and remote Australia includes keeping communities healthy by making sure they can access health services when they need them, as close to home as possible. Australians, no matter where they live, deserve access to high quality health care services.

Through measures such as the *Stronger Rural Health Strategy*, the Government aims to build a sustainable, high quality health workforce that is distributed across the country according to community need particularly in rural and remote communities. The Government's focus includes encouraging a better distribution of the rural health workforce; improving rural health education and training pathways; increasing access to health services; and strengthening primary care across Australia.

The Commissioner will be a champion of rural health in Australia and benefit rural and remote Australians by ensuring rural and remote issues are at the forefront of government decision making.

## THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH COMMISSIONER

The Commissioner is a statutory appointment, independent from the Commonwealth Department of Health and the responsible Minister. This position has been established to assist with improving the quality, sustainability and accessibility of health services in regional, rural and remote areas in order to improve health outcomes. It is imperative you act independently and objectively in performing the functions and exercising powers as set out in Schedule 1 of Part VA of the *Health Insurance Act 1973* (the Act).

## PRIORITIES FOR THE NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH COMMISSIONER

Your statutory functions are set out in Part VA of the Act. These functions enable your Office to undertake a broad range of activities to support rural health. I do not expect your Office to fulfil all functions simultaneously, but to focus efforts on opportunities to deliver tangible improvements. Key areas of work for the Commissioner's Office include:

*Supporting urgent and emerging priorities*

You should continue to support the Government's response to urgent and emerging priorities, and communicate observations or potential risks for rural health workforce and service provision. Recently, this has involved supporting the rural workforce in its COVID-19 response. I expect you to continue to support the sector in addressing the challenges and ongoing impacts of COVID-19. These include monitoring the impacts on training pathways, rural practices and supporting the vaccine roll-out. Understanding how COVID-19 has impacted on the health workforce, may highlight learnings that inform your advice on longer term workforce and service provision interventions in rural, regional and remote areas.

*Innovative models of care in regional, rural and remote Australia*

The Government is investing in trialling sub-regional approaches for delivering health services across small, connected communities. The Commissioner's Office will contribute to all aspects of this priority, with a focus on advising Government on future system-wide improvements. Your predecessor's allied health report should be considered in taking forward this work. The multidisciplinary expertise in your Office will assist you to design and test approaches that optimise the use of the entire health workforce.

I request that you design and manage a grant opportunity with the Department. This will support communities experiencing significant workforce or service access challenges to design sustainable, innovative models, customised to address their local primary care challenges.

For innovative models being trialled, I request that you provide strategic oversight of data gathering and evaluation activities. I will be seeking your advice on future reform opportunities arising from evaluating trials, including identifying localised solutions that could be scaled up more broadly.

*Rural workforce, training and primary care reform*

The Government has an ambitious agenda across workforce planning, training and primary care reform. I expect your Office to provide evidence-based and rurally focussed advice on the development of new and reform of existing policy. Current reform initiatives requiring a contribution from the Office include:

- *National Rural Generalist Pathway.* Progressing implementation of the Pathway, including designing and commencing governance arrangements to broker agreement on further implementation of the Pathway, and leading work on the application to seek national recognition of rural generalist medicine.
- *National Medical Workforce Strategy.* Participate in implementation working groups that will be established to facilitate collaboration among key stakeholders on action planning and implementation of the Strategy and, when necessary, provide advice to me on options that will improve workforce distribution and rural training outcomes.

- *Building the Rural Training Pipeline.* Support work to consider recommendations from the Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training Program evaluation, as a practical way of progressing allied health reform.
- *Primary Care reforms.* Provide advice and where requested, undertake further co-design and consultation on the implementation of rural reforms linked to the 10 Year Primary Care Plan and other key strategies.
- *Improving Access, Quality and Distribution of Allied Health Services Report.* Work with the Department and stakeholders to progress report recommendations. Once it is released, links with the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan* should be considered.

The inaugural Commissioner's reports on the *National Rural Generalist Pathway Taskforce Advice* and the *Improvement of Access, Quality and Distribution of Allied Health Services in Regional, Rural and Remote Australia* are useful resources to draw from to inform your work.

You will need flexibility to direct resources toward the implementation of early reform work and I ask that you keep me fully informed of emerging reform priorities requiring effort from your Office.

## **STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS**

In your role as Commissioner you will undertake significant consultation and collaboration with relevant stakeholders to support the Government's vision for sustainable health care services across Australia. These stakeholders will include: rural, regional and remote communities; the health sector; peak bodies; universities; specialist training colleges; the Department; and state and territory governments. You are encouraged to form a stakeholder reference group to support your work and inform your policy advice.

Regular meetings are to be convened with me to provide updates and advice on identified issues for the Government's consideration. Additionally, to support strategic policy implementation and service delivery, you will meet quarterly with the Secretary of the Department and senior health executives.

Key stakeholder groups, that you are formally involved in include (but are not limited to):

- *The Rural Health Stakeholder Roundtable (the Roundtable).* Established to promote strategic discussion and inform the development of rural health policy.
- *National Rural Generalist Pathway Governance groups.* Established to support the implementation of the National Rural Generalist Pathway and progress the remaining recommendations. Involves a Strategic Council (chaired by the Commissioner), a Jurisdictional Implementation Forum and a Stakeholder Advisory Group (chaired by the Commissioner).

- *Transition to College Led Training Advisory Committee.* As co-chair, you will have a key role in guiding the transition to reformed GP training arrangements.
- *The Distribution Advisory Group (DAG).* Established to provide independent advice on geographic distribution systems to ensure appropriate distribution of the health workforce. The DAG is responsible for reviewing the District of Workforce Shortage specialist layers, Distribution Priority Area classifications or Modified Monash Model systems.

## **ORGANISATIONAL GOVERNANCE AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT**

In performing your role and functions, you are expected to take into account the Government's broad policy framework and rural health policy priorities. The Department is available to provide advice on any issues that may impact on you fulfilling your role and statutory objectives, including on the Government's broader governance and reporting requirements under which you will operate.

A dedicated Office will be established and you will have support from two Deputy Rural Health Commissioners with multidisciplinary expertise across allied health and nursing disciplines to ensure health reforms make use of the entire health workforce.

The Secretary of the Department may enter into an arrangement with you to make the services of Australian Public Service (APS) employees available to assist you undertake your duties. You and your staff are required to uphold and promote the APS values and ensure all APS employees adhere to the *APS Code of Conduct*.

As per section 79AO of the Act, for the purposes of the finance law, you are an Official of the Department and the duties of officials set out in the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013 (PGPA Act)* apply to your Office. The PGPA Act requires you to manage the Office's activities in a way that promotes the efficient, effective and ethical use of resources. The Department will provide you with the necessary corporate support, policies and systems to fulfil the functions of your role within the allocated budget. You will not hold any financial delegation powers, or have any specific employment powers.

## **WORK PLAN**

I ask that you maintain a rolling work program, that outlines your Office's deliverables, supports implementation of the priorities set out in this Statement of Expectations, and captures new and emerging priorities.

Section 79AP of the Act allows me to task you with specific projects and to inquire into specific matters. I will do this through correspondence with you, and these are to be added to your rolling work program. This rolling work program is to be provided to my office on a quarterly basis.

**REPORTING**

As per section 79AE of the Act, I expect to be informed regularly about your Office's activities, as well as any emerging trends, milestones, achievements, opportunities or issues related to your functions. In addition, section 79AP of the Act requires you to prepare an annual report detailing your activities during the previous financial year. The report should include progress against your rolling work program. The report is due to me by 15 October each year for tabling in Parliament.

**CONCLUSION**

As Commissioner, you occupy a national leadership role with a responsibility to support the Government's vision to improve rural health policy and initiatives. Your Office will engage collaboratively with the health sector and rural communities to improve the health outcomes of rural Australians. I look forward to receiving your Statement of Intent and working with you and your office to deliver practical outcomes and improve access to health services for rural and remote communities across Australia.