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## Rural GPs essential to disaster response plans

### RDAA welcomes and prepares for Government's COVID-19 Inquiry

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) welcomes the upcoming inquiry into COVID-19, saying that greater cooperation with rural GPs is needed in all disaster management plans.

The Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry will make recommendations to improve response measures in the event of future pandemics.

Dr Megan Belot, RDAA President, said that the improved utilisation of local health services in rural areas could significantly improve disaster responses.

“With their susceptibility to fire and flood, rural communities have a long history of being on the front line of disasters,” Dr Belot said.

“COVID-19 was no different, and rural general practices were often the only provider of health care for their communities. Between the GPs and practice nurses they provided the testing, patient care, health education and then vaccinations. This was alongside the regular care needed for patients, with many doctors, nurses and practice staff falling sick with COVID-19 themselves, often multiple times, throughout the pandemic.

“No one was more affected by the issues of transport interruptions and supply chain difficulties, particularly in regards to accessing PPE, than rural health care providers and their patients.

“For years, RDAA has been calling for better integration of GPs and local health services into disaster planning arrangements.

“This was highlighted pre-pandemic when rural communities were cut off due to bushfires, with local GPs left out of the disaster response leaving some communities unable to access primary care for weeks and months. Similar issues occurred after the pandemic due to floods.

“Just like during these natural disasters, in many rural communities the engagement and utilisation of local health services in the early stages of the pandemic was not managed well,” Dr Belot said.

“This Inquiry will allow us to highlight that local engagement with the health sector is essential to disaster response.”



Dr Belot also said that the COVID response fast-tracked welcome changes in the health system, that is now resulting in better access to care for rural patients.

“The pandemic required rapid adaptation to the way we deliver care to our communities,” Dr Belot said.

“The best example of this is the permanent fixture of GP telehealth services for video and telephone consultations, increasing access and convenience for patients, particularly rural patients who often have increased travel times.

“Improved community access to vaccinations is another example.

“Australia’s response to the pandemic was rapid, extensive, and saved many lives, but there are still many lessons to learn and the Inquiry will provide an opportunity to achieve further reform and better prepare the country for its next disaster,” Dr Belot said.

“RDAA will make a submission on behalf of its members, and we invite feedback from both members and rural patients to inform our response.”

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**Photo of Dr Megan Belot:**

[Megan Belot](#)

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