

30 September 2021

Chair, The Hon Luke Hartsuyker
Australian Government Regional Telecommunications Review
E: secretariat@rtirc.gov.au

Dear Mr Hartsuyker

2021 Regional Telecommunications Review

The Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association (AHHA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review.

AHHA is Australia's national peak body for public hospitals and healthcare providers. Our membership includes state and territory health departments, Local Hospital Networks (LHNs) and public hospitals, community health services, Primary Health Networks (PHNs) and primary healthcare providers, aged care providers, universities, individual health professionals and academics. As such, we are uniquely placed to be an independent, national voice for universal high-quality health care to benefit the whole community.

To achieve a healthy Australia supported by the best possible healthcare system, AHHA recommends Australia reform the healthcare system over the next 10 years by enabling outcomes-focused and value-based health care. Broadly, this requires:

1. A nationally unified and regionally controlled health system that puts people at the centre;
2. Performance information and reporting that is fit for purpose;
3. A health workforce that exists to serve and meet population health needs;
4. Funding that is sustainable and appropriate to support a high quality health system.

AHHA's Healthy people, healthy systems¹ is a blueprint with a series of short, medium and long-term actions to achieve this goal.

In the context of the Regional Telecommunications Review, it is important to recognise that the health advantages of living away from Australia's major cities can be outweighed by higher levels of social disadvantage, inferior access to health services, higher occupational injury risks and higher health behaviour risks. These factors are associated with poor health and shorter life expectancy for many rural people.

Access to health care will be further reduced in rural and remote areas, with research² from the Northern Territory reporting that over one-third of medical professionals having indicated that extreme heat and weather events are already causing, or likely to cause, them to leave the NT. Services in other rural areas report their medical and other health workforces holding similar views.

¹ Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association. 2021. Healthy people, healthy systems. Available at <https://ahha.asn.au/Blueprint>

² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00028-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00028-0/fulltext)

With health professionals continuously in short supply, innovative models of care will be crucial for ensuring access to health care. With advances in technology, telecommunication plays a significant role in either closing or widening gaps in access and therefore health inequities. This is more than just a substitution of consultations with telephone and video consultations. It expands to the utilisation of technology that allows for the creation of models of care previously inconceivable,³ and to provide support to the health workforce who would otherwise be working in isolation. Already advancement in technologies and access to telecommunication in health care is being used for:

- Remote diagnostics, where images/video and data transfer software transmits from remote areas to metropolitan areas for review in real time, e.g. digital retinopathy, ultrasounds, ECGs, teledentistry;
- Remote supervision and advisory services for workforce (including students) under defined clinical governance arrangements;
- Emergency triage;
- The education and empowerment of people through access to health care information (from self-management, to understand diagnoses through to rehabilitation); and
- Remote monitoring, including through continuous and passive sensors.

The criticality of telecommunications in addressing health inequities is also demonstrated in responses to natural disasters and events. Telecommunication outages in bushfires, floods and cyclones impact, e.g., health delivery, access to clinical records, and e-prescribing, which have serious repercussions for consumers who are already confronted with a stressful situation. Field deployable satellite connection points should be available for emergency response vehicles in remote communities – this technology is increasingly reliable, easy to use, robust and affordable, and must provide access beyond the immediate area where it is positioned so that it reaches members of the community where they are situated.

Recognition of the importance of telecommunications to the health of regional Australians must inform the review recommendations. Connectivity must be complete and reliable, performance levels must be measured and transparently reported, and telecommunication providers must be accountable for the performance of the services they offer.

More specific recommendations to the review are provided within the response of the National Rural Health Alliance, of which AHHA is a member.

We would be happy to discuss any aspect of this response further.

Sincerely,



John Gregg
Chief Executive
Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association

³ <https://ahha.asn.au/supplement-effective-and-sustainable-adoption-virtual-health-care>