

I'm a rural doctor of over 30 years experience in rural and remote areas. I'm just back from Hay, travelling 330km just to give a hand in a neighbouring town for two days, same as every month. Hay needs 2 and a bit doctors to provide services in the town. The nearest other places to see a doctor are Hillston, Griffith, Deniliquin or Balranald, working around the compass rose. I have a business in Griffith and leave it and my patients every month to provide this support to a remote community.

I enjoy it, but we should really look at why there are no long term doctors available to the Hay community.

When I graduated in 1979, our group headed to the country, to get experience. And we did.

We were the last cohort to do so.

The changes into superspecialisation, and the myth of the invincible country doctor both worked against us.

It became impossible to get experience in delivering babies, doing surgery and anaesthetics and dealing with broken limbs. Things that I had "just done" now had to be done and certified and there were no places for doctors from the bush. The pool of adequately trained and experienced people dwindled until there were not enough to fill rosters, and a town like Hay which had 3 resident fulltime doctors attending to obstetrics, surgery and other needs in the community found itself with 2 imported doctors (a married couple) and one Australian who was no longer able to assist on the hospital roster. Their household being constantly on call was too much of a drain on the married couple, who left for the coast. The Australian doctor retired.

I have provided supervision to every new imported doctor starting at Hay over the last 10 years or so. I know them all.

One left to take a position in Sydney as a child needed special education, and one moved to Leeton when his wife passed her AMC examinations. What could have been a bonus for the town was blown by the use of a crazy scheme which rated the inconvenience of Hay no more than that of Griffith or Leeton, so that the Rural Retention Bonus for any doctor working in Hay was drastically reduced. The scheme is so crazy, that if we could pick up the bricks and mortar of the surgery building, and move it just a few hundred meters north (next to the Motor Registry) the Bonus would be Remote, not outer regional.

Currently Hay has one permanent doctor on site, a doctor from Griffith who travels over each weekend to cover the hospital, myself who provides services once a month, and luckily a locum for for the last few weeks, so we just make our two-and-a-bit doctors.

Over the years the hospital has been downgraded and the last baby born in Hay was severely premature, with no staff experienced these days in handling any newborn at all. There is no desire on the part of the State Health Department to upgrade hospital facilities regardless of the economics involved. A hospital which functions as a combination of an advanced first aid post and old people's home isn't very attractive to Australian graduates.