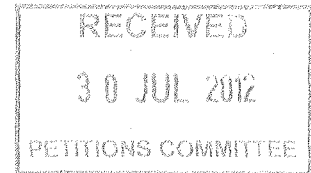




673-1083



**The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP  
Minister for Health**

The Hon John Murphy MP  
Chair  
Standing Committee on Petitions  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Murphy

Thank you for your letter of 21 June 2012 inviting my response to a submission to the Standing Committee on Petitions in which action is sought to address shortages of general practitioners (GPs) in Proserpine and the Whitsundays.

Addressing the current shortage of doctors is an important priority for the Australian Government. The Government is taking action through its National Health and Hospitals Network to tackle Australia's health workforce shortages by:

- doubling the number of places available for medical graduates to train to become a GP from 600, when the Government took office, to 1,200 a year by 2014;
- more than doubling the current number of posts available for medical graduates to undertake specialist training in private, community and rural settings from 360 to 900 by 2014 previous investments; and
- more than doubling the number of places available for junior doctors to experience a career in general practice through the Prevocational General Practice Placements Program, before they become a fully-fledged doctor, to 975 places a year by 2013.

These major investments will help reduce pressure on hospitals by improving access and availability of GP and specialist services. There is, and will continue to be, a particular emphasis on ensuring that the needs of regional and rural Australia are met through these initiatives. Furthermore, through the provision of a number of attractive financial and non-financial incentives, the Government aims to encourage doctors to work in areas where they are most needed.

This Government has introduced a range of incentives to improve the number of doctors working in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia. Doctors moving to the Proserpine region may be eligible for a relocation grant of up to \$30,000 and retention payments of up to \$18,000 each year.

In addition, Health Workforce Queensland (HWQ) is funded by the Government to assist in the recruitment and retention of GPs in regional, rural and remote Queensland. I understand that HWQ is assisting practices in Cannonvale and Proserpine to recruit new doctors and has offered locum placements within the Whitsunday region on a number of occasions.

The district of workforce shortage (DWS) classification uses current Medicare billing statistics to identify communities in which GPs to population is below the national average. I note that communities in the Whitsunday region are not currently classified as DWS. Overseas trained doctors are generally required to work in a DWS location for up to ten years. As Medicare billing statistics are updated quarterly, DWS classifications take account of changes in the composition of the local GP workforce. Changes to the DWS system may be considered as part of the broader review of workforce programs to be undertaken by my Department during 2012-13 in order to better target assistance to areas of need.

Furthermore, a key activity for the new Townsville-Mackay Medicare Local is to design and implement a region-wide health care gap analysis as a basis for more effective planning and service delivery. This includes a priority focus on after-hours GP services and undertaking up-to-date population level planning.

Once again, thank you for writing.

Yours sincerely

  
**Tanya Plibersek**

14.7.12