

MEDIA RELEASE



**RURAL DOCTORS
ASSOCIATION
OF AUSTRALIA**
Caring for the Country

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Labor announcements great news for rural doctors and their patients

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) has strongly welcomed an announcement by the Shadow Health Minister, Nicola Roxon MP, that a federal Labor Government will provide an additional \$8.5 million from 2008-09 to continue and expand the highly successful Specialist Obstetricians Locum Scheme (SOLS) for rural obstetricians and increase the number of John Flynn Scholarships for rural medical students.

Labor will extend SOLS not only to continue to provide cost-effective locum relief for rural specialist obstetricians, but also to provide locum relief for rural GP obstetricians and rural GP anaesthetists. Labor has also announced it will double the number of rural medical training places through the John Flynn Scholarship Scheme, from 150 to 300 places.

RDAA President, Dr Peter Rischbieth, said: "RDAA has been calling for these initiatives for a considerable time, so Labor's announcement is great news for doctors working in the bush and for those living in rural communities.

"RDAA's Rural Specialists Group was the driving force behind the introduction of SOLS. A pilot phase funded by the Federal Government has since assisted many rural specialist obstetricians with much-needed, cost-effective locum relief. An earlier scoping study was also funded by the Federal Government. SOLS has been managed by RDAA, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and the NSW Rural Doctors Network.

"SOLS has proven itself to be extremely valuable in supporting rural specialist obstetricians to remain in rural practice by providing them with essential, cost-effective locum relief so they can take time out of their practice for continuing medical education or a much-needed holiday. And by having a locum obstetrician in town while the usual obstetrician is away, there have been significant cost savings as many pregnant women have not had to be transferred to larger centres through expensive air retrieval to give birth.

"The extension of SOLS to provide cost-effective locum relief to rural GP obstetricians and anaesthetists is also fantastic news, as the pressure on these doctors is sky-rocketing as more procedural doctors leave the bush. These rural doctors are often on-call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for deliveries and for emergency surgery, but they often find it very difficult and expensive to get a locum so they can take study or recreation leave.

"Providing these doctors with cost-effective locum relief through SOLS will make a huge difference for many of these doctors in deciding whether it is sustainable for them to continue to practise in the bush. And in turn, this will help to keep local obstetric care and anaesthetic services available to those living in the bush.

"Labor's announcement that it will double the number of rural scholarship places for medical students through the John Flynn Scholarship Scheme is also welcomed. This can only help more medical students to train in rural and remote areas, making it much more likely that they will return to the bush to practise once they graduate.

"There are still some big ticket items to which Labor and the Coalition must commit in order to save rural healthcare from imminent disaster, including rural-specific support incentives for rural doctors, significantly more funding quarantined for rural hospitals and their maternity and other procedural services, and the introduction of a Rural Health Obligation. But Labor's announcement today is a welcome step along the road."

**Nicola Roxon MP will make the Labor announcements at 3:45pm this afternoon at the RDAA and ACRRM rural doctors conference, being held at Rydges Eagle Hawk Resort in Canberra.
RDAA President, Dr Peter Rischbieth, is available for interview.
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