

7 April 2021

Dr Hendrika Meyer
Chair, Rural Health Workforce Strategy Steering Committee
Government of South Australia
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Email: Health.RuralSupportService@sa.gov.au

Dear Dr Meyer

Re: Consultation draft for the South Australian (SA) Rural Allied Health Workforce Plan

Audiology Australia (AudA) welcomes the opportunity to provide comments to the Rural Health Workforce Strategy Steering Committee on the Consultation Draft for the SA Rural Allied Health Workforce Plan.

AudA is the peak professional body for audiologists, representing over 3,000 members across Australia. Audiologists are primary health care professionals working in the prevention, assessment, non-medical treatment and rehabilitation of hearing and balance disorders. They provide comprehensive hearing services and support to individuals and the wider community, including in rural and regional areas.

AudA's comments on the draft SA Rural Allied Health Workforce Plan is aligned with the Roadmap for Hearing Health (2019) developed by the Hearing Health Sector Committee in response to the current challenges faced by the hearing sector. The Roadmap for Hearing Health (the Roadmap) can be viewed [here](#).

AudA strongly supports the SA Rural Allied Health Workforce Plan and the development of a strategy to improve, support and sustain the rural health workforce in South Australia. AudA notes the significance of health workforce data and its pivotal role in shaping workforce decision making and planning. At present, AudA is undertaking an audit of the rural and regional hearing workforce to identify current hearing workforce issues and needs and to help future service planning in these areas. Data collected during the audit will inform the preparation of a White Paper to Government on the gaps, changing demographics and future rural and regional hearing workforce needs.

As outlined in the Roadmap, AudA acknowledges that central to Australia's achievements in hearing health care equity is the availability of an appropriately recognised, trained and qualified professional workforce that will meet the demand for quality hearing services and support. The sixth Roadmap domain – *Enhancing the Sector's Workforce* – recognises that improvements to hearing rely on a growing and trusted professional and volunteer workforce that has strong linkages to other health, research, communications and education professionals. Key issues identified in the Roadmap include the following:

- Shortages of regional, rural and remotely based clinicians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander hearing health professionals, teachers of the deaf, audiometry nurses and Auslan interpreters.

- Many working in primary care in regional Australia have a high staff turnover, lack of appropriate training and failures to adhere to best practice management.

AudA highlights the need for hearing health best practice to be embedded in primary health care, particularly in rural and remote Australia. The Roadmap has outlined the following key actions in order to enhance the hearing sector's workforce in rural and remote communities:

- Incentivise hearing health professionals servicing rural and remote areas, particularly in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Ensure telehealth is made more accessible for hearing healthcare practitioners to provide services to consumers, particularly those living in rural and remote communities.
- Develop options to address the shortage of Ear Nose and Throat (ENT) clinicians, particularly in rural and remote regions.
- Develop and deliver hearing awareness training for primary health care staff, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers and other health professionals in rural and remote areas.

AudA strongly supports the need to maximise the use of contemporary digital health advancements to complement allied health services and improve client outcomes. AudA notes that the Australian Digital Health Agency (ADHA) is currently undertaking a consultative process to recommend appropriate technical standards for telehealth consultations in Australia. In regard to the expansion and enhancement of telehealth services, AudA considers the following capabilities and features to be necessary in order to improve client outcomes:

- Availability of closed captioning across all software packages to enable telehealth (video) consultations to be accessible for clients who have a hearing impairment.
- Provision of goods as well as services via telehealth (e.g. prosthetics, prescriptions etc.). AudA notes that devices are an integral part of allied health and rehabilitation services. These may be tools required to facilitate the diagnostic process (e.g. USB otoscopes), devices to support rehabilitation (e.g. hearing aids or programmers) or to maintain current systems (e.g. batteries, receivers).
- Facilitation of e-payments and details of billing services for all funding models, including integration of all Government agencies and private services (HiCAPS, private insurers, individual funding).

In addition, AudA notes that communication skills and digital literacy is key in delivering effective telehealth services and successful client outcomes. AudA members have indicated that not every allied health professional currently has the non-clinical skills to be able to complete and manage a telehealth appointment. Therefore, AudA considers it essential to ensure that the allied health workforce is well-equipped with the digital literacy and communication skills needed to provide successful telehealth services.



We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any comments outlined in this submission further. I can be reached via Audiology Australia's Advocacy and Policy Manager, Elissa Campbell, at elissa.campbell@audiology.asn.au or (03) 9940 3900.

Yours sincerely



Dr Barbra Timmer
President

References

Audiology Australia Submission, Australian Digital Health Agency (ADHA) Trial of Consultative Process to Recommend Appropriate Technical Standards for Telehealth (2021).

Hearing Health Sector Committee, Roadmap for Hearing Health (2019). Available at:
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