

# The West Australian

Opinion Health

## OPINION

### Karen Chappel: Local councils can't keep picking up the slack on health

**Karen Chappel** The West Australian

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Karen Chappel. Credit: Peter Aquilina/RegionalHUB

- Every Australian, no matter where they call home, should have equal access to primary health care services.
- Yet, our current health care system is letting down millions of Australians, with the impact disproportionately felt by those living in rural, regional, and remote areas, including more than 500,000 here in Western Australia.

People living in rural, regional and remote areas have poorer health outcomes compared to those in the metropolitan area.

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They face higher rates of hospitalisations, deaths, and injuries.

They suffer more from preventable, chronic illnesses, and are more likely to manage multiple long-term health conditions than those in metropolitan areas.

They wait longer to get a GP appointment.

This disparity is unacceptable.

Accessing medical care in these regions is a challenge. Many communities only have access to a part-time GP, or in some cases, a nursing post. In other areas, basic medical care can only be accessed by travelling long distances – sometimes more than 100km.

The shortage of GPs in the regions has placed additional pressure on hospital emergency departments. More than half of presentations to emergency departments in rural WA are non-urgent cases, which could have been addressed by a GP if one was available.



 Karen Chappel. Credit: Jeff Henderson/RegionalHUB

The Commonwealth Government holds the reins when it comes to national health policy and funding general practice through Medicare. However, the failure of the current system has increasingly forced local governments to step in to ensure their communities have access to essential health services.

According to WALGA's local government primary health care services survey, 69 local governments spent \$6.8 million in 2021-22 to support primary health care in their communities. This support includes funding for accommodation, vehicles, and even financial assistance for GP surgeries that would be otherwise nonviable. This burden falls heavily on smaller communities, with the bulk of support for GP services provided by local governments with populations between 1000 and 5000.

This responsibility should not fall on local governments. This situation is stretching councils' budgets thin, diverting funds from other essential community services and infrastructure. They cannot, and should not, have to shoulder this cost.

As we approach the Federal and State elections, fixing the healthcare system will be a significant part of the debate. Both WA Labor and the Opposition have made various commitments aimed at improving health care in regional areas. While these promises are well-intentioned, they will not address the underlying problems within the health system.

We need the State and the Commonwealth to come together and take decisive action to fix the system.

According to the National Rural Health Alliance, there is a national rural health spending deficit of \$6.5 billion. The incoming governments must bridge this divide. We need system-wide, long-term reforms that ensure equitable provision of general practice and primary healthcare for regional, rural, and remote communities. This includes developing adequate funding models and implementing effective workforce planning, recruitment, and retention strategies.

In 2025, the Australian and all State and Territory governments will sit down to renegotiate the National Health Reform Agreement. This is the ideal opportunity to work together to achieve better outcomes for regional communities and alleviate the pressure on local governments to step in.

By tackling these issues head-on, we make sure that all Australians, regardless of where they live, have access to the primary healthcare services they need and deserve.

Karen Chappel is the president of the WA Local Government Association

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