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Rural maternity cuts put communities at risk

Two-thirds of Queensland doctors believe the State Government's push to shrink rural and regional maternity services is having an extremely dangerous or catastrophic effect on health care in country communities.

In an Australian Medical Association (AMA) Queensland poll of 700 doctors, nearly a quarter (24%) of the respondents said the reduction of maternity services in rural and regional areas was 'catastrophic' with a further 42 per cent saying it was 'extremely dangerous' and had a damaging flow-on effect.

AMA Queensland spokesman Dr Marco Giuseppin said the State Government's solution for rural and regional maternity care left many women without the option of having a doctor involved during their pregnancy or childbirth.

"They have to travel away from their home town if they need or want the services of a doctor," Dr Giuseppin.

"Once obstetricians leave rural and regional areas, there's a domino effect of hospital theatres shutting because of the drop in births and then anaesthetists and other specialists leave town because they don't have the resources needed to do their jobs. It makes it necessary for everyone – not just expectant mothers – to travel elsewhere to receive healthcare that they once would have received in their home town.

"We know Rural Generalists have incredibly broad skills and can deal with anything from a farm accident to antenatal care, but there's not much they can do without the right medical equipment and specialist support on hand."

Doctors who took part in the AMA Queensland survey ranked their number one concern with the delivery of public health care as role substitution – the practice of other health practitioners providing care normally done by doctors.

"Midwives do an outstanding job right across Queensland, but they are not doctors and vice-versa," said Dr Giuseppin, a rural generalist who works across south western Queensland.

"Each practitioner brings a unique set of skills to the task.

"Midwives have confided to me that they feel nervous and unsupported about having sole responsibility for the birth of a baby without the back-up of a doctor nearby, but the current maternity care policy means they are often required to work without that backup in rural areas.

"Queensland Health's own perinatal data demonstrates the safety and viability of rural maternity services. Maternity services provided in the bush have lower rates of intervention and comparable rates of complications to their city counterparts. This only happens because in these services doctors and midwives work together to deliver great care to patients."

The AMA Queensland survey revealed most doctors felt their advice was ignored in the public health system in favour of treatments and care solutions that placed patients at risk.

Sixty per cent of doctors surveyed did not believe the State Government made sound medical decisions regarding patient care while a further 38 per cent said 'some' decisions were sound, 'though there are some policies that don't make medical sense'.

According to the AMA Queensland survey, appointing doctors with frontline healthcare experience to senior policy-making roles in Queensland Health is the number one change needed to improve the health system. More than 40 per cent said this would improve patient care.

Other top recommendations for change included increased funding for primary care and a boost to specialist services in the public system.

Overall, the AMA Queensland survey also found 38 per cent of doctors had little or no faith in the public health system because it needed better leadership and more funding.

Another 45 per cent said services had noticeably diminished in the past decade.

Dr Giuseppin said the October state election was a chance for all politicians to demonstrate their commitment to regional communities.

"We want the Premier and Opposition Leader to set out clear, well-funded plans for healthcare across the state, so that voters can make an informed choice at the ballot box," he said.

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