



17<sup>th</sup> December 2008

The Commissioners  
Productivity Commission  
Locked Bag 2  
Collins Street East  
MELBOURNE Vic 8003

Dear Sirs

I attach a submission to the Australian Government's Inquiry into Government Drought Support conducted by the Productivity Commission.

The Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) is the peak national body for general practice in Australia supporting 111 Divisions of General Practice across Australia. Approximately ninety five percent of general practitioners are members of local Divisions of General Practice.

The submission responds to the key recommendations in the Productivity Commission's Draft Inquiry Report, specifically the termination of the drought Exceptional Circumstances (EC) policy framework.

Drought and reduced incomes for farmers, and associated wider adjustment issues, including loss of social fabric in affected communities, are continuing to impact on the mental health and wellbeing of individuals and families.

The submission highlights the findings of Drought Policy Review Panel, 'It's About People: Changing Perspectives on Dryness' (Kenny et al, September 2008) which found that: *'extended dryness has a significant negative impact on the mental health of farm families and others within rural communities'*.

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The submission also sets out the role of AGPN and the Divisions Network in a rural and remote health service delivery framework, including details of the *Mental Health Support for Drought Affected Communities Initiative*, a targeted mental health response for communities impacted by drought.

Former AGPN Chair, Dr Tony Hobbs, met with Commissioners at the Productivity Commission roundtable meeting held in Dubbo on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2008, and highlighted the issues raised in the attached submission and his personal experience in general practice in a drought affected rural setting.

AGPN submits that the federal government's policy framework must be developed against a background of recognition that changing climatic conditions and associated adjustment issues are impacting on the social fabric and the health and wellbeing outcomes for individuals in rural and remote communities, and that:

- the *Mental Health Support for Drought Affected Communities Initiative* be retained beyond its terminating date of June 2009 as an early intervention mental health and wellbeing response for rural and remote families and communities.
- the continuation of the *Mental Health Support for Drought Affected Communities Initiative* form a key part of the Health contribution to a whole-of-government response to the drought policy review.
- consideration be given to expanding models of primary health care that improve access to health services such as the More Allied Health Services (MAHS) program.

AGPN and Divisions participating in the Drought Initiative will need early advice of the federal government's intentions regarding potential continuation of the Drought Initiative, including its response to the Kenny Report in terms of a rural and remote community mental health and wellbeing response. With the Drought Initiative's due termination in June 2009, there is a potential risk of losing well embedded Community Support Workers (CSWs) to other employment in early 2009. This would result in a significant disruption to the Initiative with the valuable services they offer in communities. And with the ongoing challenge of rural workforce shortage issues, Divisions would face difficulties in recruiting replacement CSWs for the remainder of the Initiative.

Thank you for your consideration of these matters.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Butt". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "David" and the last name "Butt" clearly distinguishable.

David Butt

CEO

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