

*Editorial***REPORT FROM AUSTRALIA**

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Editorial Board Member

In the last few weeks, we have changed our Federal government and now Prime Minister Kevin Rudd from the Labour Party is our new leader. Labour have been out of power for about 11 years. The swing against the government was greatest in Queensland (where Kevin Rudd lives).

In his first week, the Prime Minister (PM) has been busy. On the first Friday after he was sworn in as PM, he visited a property at Roma in Western Queensland. The transcript from his talk at this visit reads:

‘No matter which rural community I visit in New South Wales, Victoria, in the West or here in Queensland, there is a problem of supply of rural doctors and nurses. That’s why, this morning, I discussed this with the Shadow, not the Shadow Health Minister. This morning I discussed this with the Health and Ageing Minister, Nicola Roxon. And what we propose to do is this: we will conduct now an immediate audit of the shortage of doctors and nurses and other health professionals in rural Australia, number one.

Number two: we will examine the reasons for these shortages.

And three: we’ll be asking the Department of Health and Ageing to provide us with a range of options for attracting and retaining health professionals in rural Australia.

You see, you can’t expect people to come out and farm these parts of Australia unless you’ve got basic health services. The Commonwealth is uniquely responsible for the adequate training of doctors and nurses but the Commonwealth is responsible for allocating enough university places were that to be the case. Therefore, I want to get to grips with this within the first week of us forming this Government by commissioning that work through the Federal Department of Health and Ageing. And the Federal Minister, Nicola Roxon, we’ll be announcing our intention to do this at a meeting of State and Territory Health Ministers, which is being held today in Hobart.’

This is good news for the rural health care workforce. It is good news in that it does not focus solely on doctors. Rather, it focuses on nurses and allied health professionals as well. Certainly there are plenty of data of why there is a shortage of health professionals in ‘the bush’. One of the causes is the national and international shortage of health professionals, which has impacted on rural towns as well as metropolitan ones.

However, rural nurses in particular are disadvantaged in many ways. In the past the Australian government has provided a large amount of support (most financial) for rural doctors. In what the Labour government called the ‘blame game’,

the then Federal government always stated that nurses and allied health professionals were State/Territory government responsibilities (and therefore they would 'blame' these governments or say it was the responsibilities of these governments to fix the situation - not theirs). This is despite the fact that the Federal government provides considerable funding via what is known as our 'Health care agreement', to the States/Territories from the taxation system. These funds are used as per the agreement, and are not just handed over to the State/Territory governments to spend as they will.

This new government has had other focuses on nursing. For example, they are making an incentive payment to nurses of \$A6,000 if they return to the nursing workforce. We will look at the outcome of this incentive, as previous research suggests that remuneration is not a major reason for nurses to leave their employment.

The other good news is that the Australian Rural Nurses and Midwives association, has had a major recruitment drive and now has over 1,000 members.

I wish you all a very Happy Christmas and an excellent 2008.