

REGIONS RISING CANBERRA // POLICY HACK

REGIONAL HEALTH

Policy Hack Question: What policy changes are needed to help regions capitalise on growth in the health industry?

BACKGROUND

The health care and social assistance industry is one of the largest in Australia, employing over 1.3 million people nationally. It is expected to see the biggest increase in jobs of any industry across Australia in coming years. It will not only be a key job provider in metropolitan areas, but likewise across regional Australia where the quality and the diversity of health care services we expect and require will also grow in this time. At the same time, the need for health and aged care services will continue to increase with an aging population.

Access to health care and social assistance services are important not only for the wellbeing and quality of life of people in regions, but they can also support the economic development of a region itself. Having access to good health services also improves the attractiveness of a place, and these sectors play an important role in most regional labour markets. Currently, the health care and social assistance service industry employs 14.4% of regional Australians. By 2023, the industry is expected to increase by more than 250,000 jobs, of which 34% will be in regional areas.

The health care sector and social assistance sector jobs are a mix of private and public jobs. While traditionally the public sector provided the 'backbone' of health services in a region, the private sector is increasingly playing a role in both health care and social assistance, particularly in response to changing consumer expectations.

Additionally, the industry is an important regional employer as it provides a mix of high and low skilled jobs. High skilled jobs range from medical practitioners and nurses through to other allied health professionals like psychologists and physiotherapists. At the same time, the industry is supported by a range of entry level and lower skilled non-health occupations such as cooks, cleaners, receptionists and office managers that help to provide essential services supporting the functions of hospitals and other health related establishments. In turn, the industry provides a variety of low, mid and high paying jobs. It accounts for 12.5% of high income jobs (\$104K+) in regions.

The important role of the health care and social assistance industry in regions and the expected growth in demand for people to fill these jobs means that many regions will be competing for the same kinds of workers, with the same kinds of skills. As of January 2019, there were more than 6,200 vacancies in health jobs across regional Australia. The attraction and retention of health professionals in regional Australia is already a challenge in many places, and this may well intensify in future. Particularly for regional Australia, specialised medical professions such as diagnostic radiographer, sonographer and occupational therapist are already difficult job vacancies to fill.

Although there are current challenges with attracting and retaining healthcare professionals in regional areas, the future projections for job growth mean there are big opportunities for Australia too, and the outcomes will depend on how regions respond to building the industry and supporting their local workforce.

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