



SARRAH

Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health

IGNORING ALLIED HEALTH WORKFORCE SHORTAGES WON'T MAKE THEM GO AWAY

National Disability Services (NDS), the national peak body for non-government disability services, has reported the sector is facing a critical shortage of allied health professionals. This means many NDIS participants can't access services they need to build and retain their capacity and live well. Improving this access so people can optimise their engagement in everyday life and opportunities was one of the main reasons the NDIS was introduced.

"Providing NDIS participants with the allied health services they need has been an ongoing challenge for the scheme," said Cath Maloney, CEO of Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health. "Children with developmental disorders are waiting up to two years to access therapeutic services. The consequences of this delay can mean lifelong challenges for those children. Many thousands of families are being affected, across Australia, but especially in rural and remote areas. It is completely at odds with what the NDIS is meant to deliver."

The NDS report highlights the ongoing difficulties recruiting the allied health workforce needed to provide services in remote and very remote areas. It confirms what SARRAH and others have been saying for years. "People can't access the allied health services they need, and the situation seems to be getting worse," said Cath. "The impacts of COVID have made things worse, but the real, long-term crisis is due to inadequate planning and investment in the workforces we need."

"NDS have shown what's happening in the disability sector, but the same problems are reducing access in aged care and health services across the board. In aged care, for example, the Royal Commission found on average that aged care residents received on average 8 minutes of allied health care a day and the Commissioners were concerned this was not enough. The latest reports show the 8 minute average is now down to 2 minutes. The issue is not being addressed in any convincing way."

When there is a serious shortage of health workers, staff can't move between sectors without impacting the people who rely on those other services. For example, the shortage of registered nurses is a serious challenge to the Government's commitments in aged care. The shortage of doctors choosing to be GPs means if you shift them from one area of need it is likely to make the situation even worse in more remote locations.

The NDS report is important because it brings a focus to the allied health shortages which are a long-standing and deeply serious problem too often ignored by policy and funding decision-makers.

But the shortage in allied health in rural and remote Australia is twice as severe as it is for GPs. That's worrying for anyone who understands or needs allied health care. So what are we talking about when we say "allied health"?

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The allied health workforce includes professionals like physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, dietitians, psychologists and many more. They are trained to help people stay well, regain strength and capacity in physical, sensory, psychological, cognitive, social and cultural functioning. They provide expert care to every age group and across the health, aged care, education and disability service sectors. There are around 200,000 of them in Australia, but not enough to meet community need.

Allied health services are needed across the entire health system and for every age group.

- If someone has a stroke and needs help to speak, swallow, move, deal with stress and isolation – the care provided by a physiotherapist, speech pathologist, a dietitian, an occupational therapist, a psychologist and more can be critical to recovery and the person's future quality of life.
- When a three-year old child has a developmental issue with serious implications for their future that needs attention now, their parents don't want to hear the next available appointment is in 12 months' time.
- If someone has a serious accident, they want to know paramedics on the way.
- People want pharmacists to provide medication and tell them how to use it safely.
- People with diabetes at risk of losing a leg are very interested in how podiatrists can help.
- And if a person loses their leg, how prosthetists can help them retain as much mobility and independence as possible.
- When someone has an accident at work and needs rehabilitation - to keep their job, pay the bills and mortgage they understand what allied health therapies are about.

Anyone looking already knows people in rural and remote Australia face: higher levels of chronic disease; are more likely to be hospitalised for conditions that could have been prevented if they could get the right care when they needed it; shorter average life spans than their counterparts in metropolitan areas; greater rates of disability; and poorer access to health services they need – because the workforce is not there, they are too far away or the costs and wait times are too great.

NDS is calling for allied health workforce to be a focus at the national Jobs and Skills Summit the Government is hosting in Canberra in early September. It absolutely should be, but not only so the Government funded services can be delivered to people who need them but for the good of the nation and our economy. Investment in enabling health and social services are a driver of our economic recovery, delivering:

- increased productivity of the entire workforce through higher participation rates and reduced lost work hours
- Better health and education outcomes for our children
- Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, a better chance of closing the gap in health, education and jobs
- Opportunity for people with disability to participate in the social and economic aspects of life and
- Better quality of life for older Australians living safely in the community for longer

“Skilled allied health professionals - the second largest group of health professionals nationally – lead jobs demand yet they are all but ignored by policy makers. This is unfathomable given existing shortages and the findings of the Aged Care and Disability Royal Commissions that identified this workforce is critical to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable Australians.”

The Health and Social Assistance sector, which includes doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, personal care workers and others, has been by far the largest sector of employment growth for two decades. More importantly, the Government's own projections show it will continue to be the greatest generator of jobs, and demand, in the future: with over 300,000 extra workers needed over the next five years, with allied health leading demand.

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Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health

SARRAH is the peak body representing rural and remote allied health professionals (AHPs) working in public, private and/or community settings SARRAH advocates on behalf of rural and remote Australian communities. SARRAH maintains that every Australian should have access to health services wherever they live, and the allied health services are fundamental to the well-being of all Australians. <https://www.sarrah.org.au/>

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – SARRAH MEDIA RELEASE, 20 APRIL 2022

Data has been drawn from the [National Skills Commission’s Employment Projections](#) material, updated in March 2022 and accessed 13 April 2022.

Health and Social Assistance is by far the leading sector of jobs growth across the economy. It has been the dominant sector for jobs growth over the past 2 decades and is projected by the National Skills Commission to continue to be lead jobs growth through until November 2026 at least.

The following table provides a summary snapshot, comparing the size and proportion of jobs growth projected for several key sectors.

Sector	Projected increase in jobs for the 5 years to Nov 26	% Increase of existing workforce
Health and Social Assistance	301,000	15.8%
Accommodation and Food Services	112,400	13.2%
Construction	66,400	5.8%
Mining	15,900	5.9%
Manufacturing	23,100	5.9%
Financial and Insurance Services	33,200	6.3%

Refer - <https://labourmarketinsights.gov.au/industries/industry-details?industryCode=Q>

SARRAH estimates that around 100,000 or more of the 301,000 are needed in regional, rural and remote Australia, noting:

- Massive current shortages
- Population shifts to those communities
- Unidentified demand.

At a more detailed level, the following table shows that even within the Health and Social Assistance sector allied health professions (bolded) lead demand. A small number of other sector professional groups are included for comparative purposes.

Projected Employment Growth for the five years to November 2026: National Skills Commission: selected

Audiologists and Speech Pathologists	34.7%
Podiatrists	31.8%
Physiotherapists	28.7%
Dental Practitioners	27.8%
Social Workers	23.2%
Early Childhood Teachers	21.6%
Optometrists and Orthoptists	15.1%
Drillers, Miners and Shot Firers	14.9%
Medical Imaging Professionals	14.7%
Registered Nurses	13.9%
Psychologists and Psychotherapists	13.3%
General Practitioners and RMOs	10.2%
Accountants	9.2%
TOTAL PROJECTED EMPLOYMENT GROWTH - AUSTRALIA	9.1%
Pharmacists	9%
Ambulance Officers and Paramedics	8.4%
Occupational Therapists	7.4%
Nutrition Professionals	7.2%
Industrial, Mechanical and Production Engineers	5.5%