

SARRAH

Services for Australian
Rural and Remote Allied Health

Media Release

14 October 2022

14 OCTOBER – ALLIED HEALTH PROFESSIONS DAY – A DAY TO RECOGNISE A VITAL, RAPIDLY GROWING AND SKILLED WORKFORCE IN HIGH DEMAND

Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health (SARRAH), the peak body for allied health professionals working in rural and remote Australia, is proud to acknowledge the amazing efforts and contribution our members and their allied health colleagues make in improving the lives of many millions of Australians every year.

Every day, over 200,000 allied health professionals apply their skills in Australia to improve the lives of people – helping them to stay well and productive, to recover from illness and injury and lead better, fuller, healthier lives.

The Health and Social Assistance sector, which includes allied health professions, has been and remains the fastest growing jobs sector in the economy. That is set to continue for years to come and allied health professions are the fastest growing professions in demand in that sector.

On Wednesday this week, the ABS released Census data, confirming *“There are now over 1.7 million people working in Health Care and Social Assistance in Australia, of which 30 per cent are working in hospitals”*, said Dr David Gruen, the Australian Statistician and head of the ABS. The ABS cited stand out areas of growth, between the 2016 Census and 2021 Census, including *“Aged and Disabled Carers (227,535 in 2021, up by 72 per cent since 2016), Occupational Therapists (19,429 in 2021, up by 57 per cent), and Audiologists and Speech Pathologists (13,613 in 2021, up by 49 per cent).”*

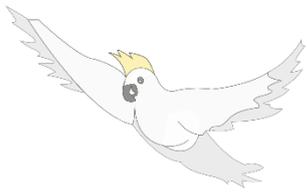
“Allied Health Professions Day recognises all the health disciplines that make up this vital workforce” said Cath Maloney, SARRAH CEO. “The National Skills Commission has projected demand in the overall workforce will grow by around 9 per in the five years to November 2026. This is more than a statistical curiosity. Surely a professional workforce that has doubled in 5 years and is projected to continue to grow is worth taking time to understand”, Cath says.

Occupational Therapists, Audiologists and Speech Pathologists are **allied health professionals**. The term allied health covers between 20 and 30 other professions that are critical to the quality of care people receive. They work to keep us well, to keep us out of hospital unless it’s absolutely necessary, to go to hospital, and if we do get hospitalised they provide the treatments we need to recover, regain strength and return to community living. They work with us at every age and in every health and social service sector.

Like many other health professions, allied health professionals are really important in providing hospital services, but most work in the community, providing rehabilitation, early childhood developmental care, enabling services for those of us who are aged, for those of us with disability and those of us dealing with mental health issues.

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A major problem is that just aren't enough allied health professionals to meet community need and not enough support to make sure that people who need this care can access it. The shortage of allied health professions in rural and remote Australia is severe, long-term and excludes many people from accessing the services people have a legal and ethical right to access. *"How universal is our health and social support system if we continue to see far higher rates of avoidable chronic disease and hospitalisations in rural and remote Australia? How accessible is our support for Australians with disability if it takes 1 to 2 years for a child to get access for a developmental assessment that could change the course of their life? How disappointing is it for a person who finally gets assessed and has a package of support provided under the NDIS to find out they can't access the therapeutic and enabling services to help them because there isn't the workforce or service system to deliver it to them? What do you say to the person in serious crisis about the priority we put on helping them through the situation, if only there were the skilled clinicians that know your community and circumstances?"*, asks Cath.

The allied health workforce is predominantly female. For professions identified in the ABS release – such as occupational therapists and speech pathologists – 90 per cent or more are women. So why aren't allied health professions, a skilled workforce in extreme high demand, not a central focus in the Government's jobs and gender equality push? Do allied health professionals need to wear hardhats or high viz to get the attention and investment they deserve?

As Dr Gruen says, *"Census data provides government and community groups with crucial information about essential healthcare and welfare services."* Are policy makers listening?

Not enough is being done to ensure a rural allied health workforce exists or demand can be met. Our health care and service systems need an overhaul. National Cabinet knows it and have tasked Health and Disability Ministers and senior officials with work to improve care coordination and pathways for people, interfaces and flows, because these systems are not working as well as they should be.

Our future health, disability support, aged care and other systems will be more fit for purpose, more responsive, more health-enabling and more financially sustainable if they are shaped around community access and well-being. Australia needs a national allied health workforce strategy now.

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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/>

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