

Monday 23 October 2023

New President to push for expanded rural services

Media doorstep with Dr RT Lewandowski
10.30am AEDT, tomorrow (Tuesday 24 October)
Senate Courtyard, Parliament House, Canberra

The new President of the Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) will push for an expansion of key health services in rural and remote communities – including sustainable rural maternity services, new procedural services like endoscopies, and non-procedural services like mental healthcare and paediatric care – that can deliver significant ‘bang for the health buck’ when provided locally by Rural Generalist doctors who live and work in their rural community.



Dr Raymond ‘RT’ Lewandowski is a Rural Generalist doctor working in the Far North Queensland communities of Innisfail and Cairns.

He replaces Dr Megan Belot in the role, following the completion of her two years as President at RDAA’s AGM (held in Hobart last Friday).

“As a Rural Generalist Obstetrician, I know how critical rural maternity services are to those living in rural communities” **Dr Lewandowski said.**

“That’s why it is so crucial we do everything we can to ensure the survival of these services into the future.

“But there are other medical services too that would greatly benefit rural and remote Australians, if provided closer to home.

“As a Rural Generalist doctor who also provides endoscopies, I know that expanding endoscopy services into more of our rural and remote communities would make a big impact in ensuring early bowel cancer screening for more of our population without them having to travel long distances to access this service – or simply choosing not to get an endoscopy because it’s too hard to access it.

“A reason often cited for the downgrading or closure of rural procedural services is the shortage of Rural Generalist doctors with advanced skills in areas like anaesthetics, obstetrics, endoscopy and general surgery.

“There is also huge demand in rural communities for more non-procedural services like mental healthcare, geriatric care, palliative care and paediatric care.

“That is why it is critical that governments continue the roll-out of the National Rural Generalist Pathway program, to ensure we are training enough Rural Generalist doctors to sustain these much-needed rural services into the future – the roll-out has commenced but full implementation needs to continue with more haste.”

Dr Lewandowski added that, as an Australian Doctor trained overseas, he is well qualified to constructively contribute to discussions regarding health professional migration to Australia – and build on the advocacy he has already been undertaking on this issue as RDAA President Elect.

“I welcome the current attention being given on improving the pathway into Australia for doctors trained overseas as well as other health professionals” he said.

“Having been through the experience myself of applying to work as a doctor in Australia – and having to make repeated applications due to bureaucratic time limitations and repeated documentation requests, there is much that can be done to streamline the system without compromising safety and quality.

“RDAA has long pushed for a central repository for documentation regarding doctor credentialing, and through the enhancements being considered for overseas doctors there is potential to expand some of the initiatives to achieve system-wide reform to better utilise the domestic medical workforce to its maximum capacity across the country.”

In the wake of the Voice Referendum outcome, Dr Lewandowski told delegates at the Rural Medicine Australia 2023 (RMA23) conference in Hobart at the weekend that RDAA will stand shoulder to shoulder with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the weeks, months and years ahead.

“First Nations doctors who were at RMA23 told us they felt very supported by the wider community of rural doctors, medical students and others who were in attendance at the conference – as well as RDAA and the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM) – in the wake of the Referendum outcome” he said.

“Given the positive social and health outcomes that will flow from both the genuine recognition of First Nations people – and enabling them to have a stronger voice on the social and healthcare policies that impact them – it is critical we continue to advocate strongly for this going forward.”

Dr Lewandowski thanked outgoing RDAA President, Dr Megan Belot, for her significant work and achievements while in the role.

“Megan has been a fantastic leader for us during her time as President” he said.

“She has helped realise significant reforms in areas including paid parental leave for all professionals, including rural doctors; the further roll-out of Single Employer Models that make it much more appealing for junior doctors to consider careers in general practice, while retaining leave, superannuation and other entitlements from their time working in the hospital system; and the inclusion of Workforce Incentive Program (WIP) payments for rural doctors who provide advanced skills to their communities (including doctors who work part-time).

“Many of these initiatives make rural practice much more appealing to the current generation of junior doctors, many of whom want to achieve a better work-life balance.

“Megan has also been an incredibly strong advocate for rebuilding a sustainable network of rural maternity services across Australia, and under her leadership RDAA was instrumental with the Australian College of Midwives in convening this year’s National Forum on Rural Maternity Services that has resulted in a Working Group being formed to drive critical reforms in this area.

“I thank Megan for the immense effort and commitment she has made in her time as RDAA President.”

RDAA farewelled three members of the Board at Friday’s AGM:

- Tom O’Donnell (Community Representative)
- Dr Simon Quilty (Consultant Specialist Nominee)
- Dr Brittney Wicksted (RDA Western Australia nominee)

RDAA welcomed the following new members to the Board:

- Dr Clark Wasiun (RDA Western Australia nominee)
- Dr Sue Velovski (Consultant Specialist Nominee)

Existing RDAA Board members who continue for the year ahead are:

- Dr Megan Belot (Immediate past President)
- Dr Ben Dodds (RDA Tasmania nominee)
- Dr Marian Dover (Doctor in Training Nominee)
- Dr Charles Evill (RDA NSW nominee)
- Dr Emily Harrison (RDA Victoria nominee)
- Dr Sue Masel (RDA Queensland nominee)

The following roles will be appointed by the Board in the weeks ahead:

- Community Representative

“We really appreciate the enormous contribution that Tom, Simon and Brit made to our Board during their time with us” **Dr Lewandowski said.**

“Tom (a lawyer), Simon (an experienced Rural Specialist Physician), and Brit (a young doctor with a passion for Rural Medicine) each brought a unique perspective to our work. The depth they each contributed to our deliberations on issues cannot be underestimated, and we thank them for their service.”

About Dr RT Lewandowski

Dr Lewandowski was born in the United States and undertook his medical training there.

He initially came to Australia in 2008 for a year’s sabbatical, but decided to stay here and ultimately immigrated permanently in 2011.

He is married to Letitia (a rural emergency nurse) and has two adult children – his son Cas (who works in the IT industry in Melbourne) and his daughter Abbie (a fifth year medical student at James Cook University).

Dr Lewandowski has recognised Advanced Skills in Operative Obstetrics and Endoscopy, and is a Fellow of the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM).

He works as a Senior Medical Officer at Cairns Base Hospital – providing endoscopy and gastrointestinal services. He alternates this every second week with his role as a Senior Medical Officer at Innisfail Hospital, where he works in the Emergency Department as well as providing obstetrics and endoscopy services.

Dr Lewandowski is a past President of the Rural Doctors Association of Queensland (RDAQ), and has also served as a Director of the Rural Doctors Foundation.

Dr RT Lewandowski is available for interview.

A high resolution photo of Dr Lewandowski is [available here](#).

A high resolution photo of Dr Megan Belot is [available here](#).

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