Report reveals rural children miss out on early intervention

A new report released today has found that a serious shortage of early intervention providers in country areas, especially psychologists, means rural children with autism and disabilities are accessing up to 60% less funding than urban children under two key government programs.

The report concludes that the programs are failing children living in rural and remote Australia because rural families cannot access their entitlement of up to $12,000 per child (up to age seven) to help improve their speech and behaviour before starting school.

The report, conducted for Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health (SARRAH) as part of an Australian National University research project, found at least 37 regions with no early intervention private sector providers in crucial areas such as psychology, speech pathology and occupational therapy. All three of these allied health services are regarded as best practice interventions for children with autism.

Hotspots where children miss out on early intervention include:

- Griffith, Moree, Young and Eurobodalla Shire in NSW
- Alice Springs, Katherine and Nhulunbuy in NT
- Charleville, Chinchilla, Gayndah, Lowood, Roma and Warwick in QLD
- Berri, Murray Bridge and Renmark in SA
- Burnie, Deloraine, Queenstown and Wynyard in TAS
- Gascoyne, Kimberley region, Mid-West, Outer-Goldfields and Pilbara in WA
- Shepparton in VIC

The findings stem from a survey of advisors and registrants with Australia’s two early intervention programs, Help for Children with Autism (HCWA) and Better Start for Children with a Disability (Better Start). Although HCWA and Better Start include a $2,000 travel allowance for families living in outer regional or remote areas, the programs do not include travel allowances for therapists.

The research also looked at the registration data for clients of HCWA and Better Start and found that rural children were 23% less likely to be registered – this means they cannot access the funds to which they are entitled for therapies.

The research was conducted by an ANU Masters student, Maximiliane Hanft on behalf of SARRAH, which administers the National Rural and Remote Support Service – a federally-funded program that aims to
extend early intervention therapies across rural Australia by tackling the barriers to practising outside the cities. A link to the research paper is


SARRAH CEO Rod Wellington said this was the first data set to reveal the extent of Australia’s social equity crisis in delivering help for the most vulnerable children across the nation.

He said the report highlights to policymakers in Canberra that more attention is needed on the delivery of national health programs in rural areas, due to the ongoing shortage of health providers.

The report concludes that “the individual funding model that lies at the heart of HCWA and Better Start, which is based on the idea of choice and empowerment of clients, fails in rural Australia.”

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Allied health professions include: audiology, chiropractics, dental and oral health, dietetics and nutrition, diabetes education, exercise physiology, genetic counselling, health promotion, medical radiation science, occupational therapy, optometry, osteopathy, paramedic practice, physiotherapy, podiatry, prosthetics and orthotics, psychology, social work, speech pathology, sonography.

Interviews/Photo Opportunities: SARRAH Administration, Cate Patrick: 02 6285 4960.