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'If it can happen here it can happen anywhere': sudden GP exodus triggers community crisis

Armidale GP Dr Vicki Howell says radical solutions are needed to address the desperate shortage of doctors in rural areas

 [Carmel Sparke](#)

 20  14 March 2023  Save



Dr Vicki Howell. Photo: Practice website.

A GP has described the anguish of thousands of patients in her community who have been left without access to general practice care following the exodus of eight doctors in just 12 weeks.

Dr Vicki Howell says the relocations have caused a crisis, with a quarter of Armidale's residents now without a GP.

"If it can happen here it can happen anywhere," said Dr Howell, who is chair of the New England Division of General Practice.

"It's a beautiful town. It's a regional centre, with services, resources, really good education facilities and affordable housing. And we have a university that has a medical school."

All of Armidale's GP practices have closed their books to new patients, leaving around 6000 residents out of a population of 25,000 in the lurch, Dr Howell said.

“Every hour of every day our practice fields calls from people who do not have a GP.

— Dr. Howell

“The people ringing up are angry. They’re desperate and very worried”.

Among the eight doctors to leave Armidale in the last three months were rural doctors, GP Dr Maree Puxty and GP obstetrician and anaesthetist Dr Terry Bohlsen.

Both highly experienced, they joined the West Armidale Medical Centre 18 years ago, and worked in Moree, 250km north west of Armidale, for a decade before that.

They are moving to the coast to be closer to ageing parents and older children after selling their practice to the charity Healthy Communities Foundation Australia (formerly known as Rural and Remote Medical Services) 12 months ago.

The practice’s 4000 patients were being offered telehealth until doctors could be recruited.

Other doctors included two IMGs leaving Armidale for personal reasons, and GPs who were retiring.

Dr Howell said doctors were going but not being replaced, and the problems would become much worse in the future, with many of the town’s GPs aged over 55 and considering retirement.

GPs were also exhausted by the pandemic, and many were looking to reduce their working hours to prevent burnout.

Radical approaches were needed from federal and state governments to provide innovative solutions and address the funding “black holes”.

Dr Howell wants the single-employer model for junior doctors, being trialed in Tasmania and the Murrumbidgee Local Health District in south western NSW, to be introduced in the Armidale region.

Other solutions included reinstating Distribution Priority Area regulations, and funding rural general practice nurses to maximise the provision of care by GPs.

“It’s not going to get any better. We need these new models because what we’ve been doing for the last 10 or 15 years, is not working,” Dr Howell said.

“The situation is getting worse and it’s going to get significantly worse than this again.”

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