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Rural seniors need better access to health services

Queensland seniors living in rural and remote areas are struggling to cover the costs of travel and accommodation to get to vital medical appointments, says National Seniors Australia.

Rural members of National Seniors Australia say the most pressing issue they face at the state government level is the lack of financial assistance available through Queensland Health's Patient Travel Subsidy Scheme (PTSS).

National Seniors chief executive Michael O'Neill said the cost of travelling to medical appointments and paying for accommodation was very expensive, yet not enough financial support was being offered.

"It's clear when we talk to our members in rural Queensland that they are really struggling out there- they have to travel hundreds or thousands of kilometres sometimes and the last thing we want is our elderly people stressing out about whether they can afford to go or not," O'Neill said.

"Currently, a patient must attend the nearest specialist and if they choose an alternative, no assistance is provided.

"In the government's 2010-2020 *Positively Ageless* strategy plan for seniors, they have stated that they need to explore more ways to improve patient travel for rural seniors, but to date, we have not seen any real improvements.

"National Seniors concurs that more needs to be done in this area and that the PTSS needs to be enhanced, especially since the Queensland government scrapped the state's 8.4 cents per litre fuel subsidy scheme from 1 July 2009, despite rising fuel costs."

The current subsidy levels are 15 cents per kilometre for every kilometre travelled over 50km. Accommodation assistance is \$30.00 per night for commercial accommodation.

"This is extremely inadequate considering the distances people have to travel within QLD and accommodation prices in Brisbane, for example. For many years, there have been no adjustments to reflect rising costs of petrol and accommodation."

O'Neill said while Queensland spends more in dollars terms on PTSS than any other state or territory, this is expected considering Queensland's population spread, the vastness of rural Queensland and the inherent lack of attendant medical facilities and support.

"Hence, Queensland has a disproportionate requirement for PTSS and funding needs to reflect this unique situation.

"As well as improving assistance provided under PTSS, a real and visible effort is necessary to improve the medical facilities in rural and remote areas.

"Some recent improvements are evident but fail to appropriately deal with the dislocate vastness of rural Queensland but recipients, particularly seniors, are suffering and we consider the subsidy levels currently provided to be inadequate."

In its budget submission to the Queensland Government, National Seniors is calling for an immediate increase in both the travel and the accommodation component of the PTSS.

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