Government of South Australia
SA Health

FACT SHEET

Single Employer Model for regional South Australia

10 May 2024

This is a Commonwealth initiative that enables Rural Generalists and General Practice trainees to be employed by a single employer for up to four years while they complete their training.

It is an opportunity for SA Health to deliver focused, increased healthcare to communities in regional and rural settings that often see patients having to travel to metro areas to access critical care.

The SEM trials will bring more GPs to those communities that need them in the short-term and builds the long-term evidence-base for this employment model and its impacts on health service provision and capacity.

The opportunity for regional SA

South Australia has one existing SEM trial at the Riverland Academy of Clinical Excellence (RACE) in the Riverland Mallee Coorong Local Health Network (RMCLHN), and in May 2024 approval for a separate trial across the remaining five regional Local Health Networks (LHNs)s, covering the whole of regional South Australia, was announced.

The current SEM trial in the Riverland has shown early signs of success, having demonstrated positive results in attracting and retaining rural trainees. It began in December and offers multiple-year contracts to junior doctors. The new South Australian SEM trial will see 60 new positions become available under the SEM, on top of the 20 already used at RACE.

This comes on the back of a proposal put together through a collaborative effort between the Rural Support Service (RSS), Rural Generalist Program of South Australia (RGPSA), regional LHNs, Department for Health and Wellbeing and local stakeholders.

Benefits of the Single Employer Model

The SEM makes it more appealing for junior doctors to enter the rural generalist training pathway by providing continual access to entitlements under the one employer – such as sick leave and annual leave – whilst supporting their training in delivery of services in general practices and hospitals.

In this instance, the employer will be SA Health, managed by the regional local health network.

Both rural and metropolitan GP trainees generally need to leave public sector employment during their required training periods in private general practice.

This results in them losing their entitlements and having limited access to extended leave including parental leave. However, under the SEM, Rural Generalists and GP trainees can have the same employer for the duration of their training. This means they'll keep their employment entitlements which accrue over time, including annual leave.

This model is therefore recognised as a potentially useful tool in attracting future rural GP and Rural Generalist trainees. Its intended outcome is to give trainees certainty about location, income and working conditions such as work hours, on-call obligations, and leave entitlements including long service and maternity leave.

The model doesn't replace current employment models for Rural Generalist and GP trainees; it's in addition to them. The SEM is optional for GPs in training and will be set up as an opt-in. Rural registrars will have a choice as to whether they take part in the SEM model.

How the model works

Under the SEM, regional LHNs will be responsible for employing the trainee for the duration of their training.

For the periods that the trainee spends in general practice, there will be an agreement between the General Practice and the regional LHN – in most cases a memorandum of understanding.

Under the Commonwealth SEM trial, the General Practice trainee is allowed to bill Medicare whilst in the practice. Part of this revenue is retained by the General Practice to ensure all overheads are covered, and a portion is provided to the LHN to offset the trainee's salary.

What the Commonwealth provides in a SEM trial

The single employer model requires Commonwealth support, as state government employees are not usually eligible to bill Medicare due to rules in Section 19(2) of the *Health Insurance Act 1973*.

The Commonwealth supports the SEM by granting s19(2) exemptions for specific participating sites.

This exemption for doctors in GP/Rural Generalist training is granted to a specific General Practice where the trainee will undertake their training and the 'state' (in our case, the regional LHN) becomes the 'employer' of the trainee doctor.

Trainee doctors who are employed under the SEM at approved General Practices are therefore able to bill Medicare for services provided for the duration of their training.

The revenue raised both supports the General Practice and offsets the trainee's salary.

The Murrumbidgee success story

The first Australian SEM trial was successfully piloted in New South Wales in the Murrumbidgee Local Health District. The establishment of the Murrumbidgee Rural Generalist Training Pathway has been successful, resulting in these positive outcomes:

- Growing Rural Generalists who provide primary care as rural GPs, along with advanced skills that are needed by the communities they serve.
- A reduction in locum costs.

- A reduction in indirect costs from increased retention and enhanced hospital and practice relationships.

Expanding the SEM across South Australia

We want to build retention of Rural Generalists who provide primary care as rural GPs with advanced skills that are needed by the communities they serve.

The main objective of the SEM trial is to address the inequity in trainee salaries and entitlements for GP registrars and their hospital-based peers.

It's intended this initiative will contribute to building a more sustainable primary healthcare workforce into the future, with only 13% of medical students in Australia currently seeking a career in general practice.

A working group made up of representatives from the Rural Support Service and its RGPSA program, each regional local health network and the Department for Health and Wellbeing's Strategy & Intergovernmental Relations team will work closely with local GP clinics and other stakeholders to map the most effective way to roll out the program, taking learnings from the SEM trial underway at RMCLHN.

This is an exciting opportunity to attract and retain Rural Generalists and general practice trainees to regional South Australia.

Here's what industry stakeholders are saying:

> *"The evidence shows GPs who experience quality training in rural areas are significantly more likely to stay there and serve those communities."*
>
> – Dr Nicole Higgins, President, RACGP
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> *"The Single Employer Model for Rural Generalist doctors is an initiative that RDAA has been advocating for over several years, as we see it as a way of making rural practice a more attractive career choice for junior doctors, the vast majority of whom are currently seeking careers in other non-GP specialist areas."*
>
> – Dr Megan Belot, President, RDAA

For more information

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