RACGP

Healthy Profession.
Healthy Australia.

South Australia General Practice Pre-Budget Submission 2027–28

Strengthening primary care capacity, investing in specialist general practitioners, and relieving pressure on acute health services

Executive summary

General practitioners (GPs) are uniquely equipped to deliver comprehensive, whole-of-person, whole-of-life care. A robust general practice sector focused on prevention, early intervention, and continuity of care is the most cost-effective solution to keep South Australians healthy and reduce mounting pressure on public hospital emergency departments and ambulance services.

Following discussions with South Australian Treasurer Tom Koutsantonis MP regarding reinvesting payroll tax revenue into primary care, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) SA presents a targeted $6.0 million per annum Pre-Budget Submission for 2027–28. This proposal addresses critical workforce shortages by providing an affordable solution and establishes seamless non-GP specialist advice pathways to keep patients in primary care and relieve pressure on the hospital system.

The strategic challenge: Unmet needs in South Australia's health system

South Australia's health system continues to face significant operational pressures, highlighted by record ambulance ramping, overcrowded emergency departments, increasing demand associated with aged care bed block, and growing public hospital outpatient waiting lists.

There are 491 older South Australians waiting for a federal aged care bed. A stretched acute care workforce is attempting to manage an increasingly complex, ageing patient population with high rates of chronic disease, frailty, cognitive impairment, and complex medication requirements.

Investing in specialist general practice is one of the most cost-effective strategies available to government. Independent economic data demonstrates that every $1 invested in primary care delivers an estimated $1.60 in health system benefits. Across Australia, potentially preventable hospitalisations cost $7.7 billion in 2023–24, accounting for more than 3.1 million hospital bed days. Conditions such as diabetes complications, congestive cardiac failure, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) are primary drivers of avoidable hospital occupancy, and these conditions are routinely and best managed in general practice.

However, two structural gaps currently hinder general practice from fully absorbing acute care demand in South Australia:

- **Workforce deficit:** Some South Australian communities experience difficulty accessing ongoing GP care, forcing reliance on expensive locum arrangements and driving unnecessary emergency department presentations. There are 107.4 GPs per 100,000 people in South Australia compared with the national average of 114.2.
- **Integration and non-GP specialist access gap:** GPs currently lack a formal, statewide mechanism for rapid access to advice from public hospital specialists. In the absence of timely non-GP specialist input, GPs are often required to refer patients to outpatient clinics, where wait times for many specialties exceed 18 months. Many of these patients could be safely managed within primary care if non-GP specialist advice was readily available, enabling earlier intervention and ongoing management before conditions progress to more complex or chronic illness.

Summary of Pre-Budget initiatives for 2027–28

To address these critical gaps, RACGP SA proposes a total recurrent investment of $6.0 million per annum, structured across two high-impact priorities:

Initiative	Strategic rationale	Funding per annum
General Practice Workforce Package	Targeted financial incentives for IMGs ($40k x 70 grants totalling $2.8m), rural GP supervisor support ($0.7m), and a Metro-to-Rural Practice Program ($0.5m) to build rural workforce capacity.	**$4.0 million**
Statewide Non-GP Specialist Advice Program	Statewide digital platform enabling GPs to obtain timely consultant-level advice (initially piloting Geriatrics and Respiratory Medicine) to avoid hospital referrals.	**$2.0 million**
Total Investment Request	**Targeted annual investment to build primary care workforce capability and reduce acute healthcare system pressure.**	**$6.0 million**

Priority 1: General Practice Workforce Package ($4.0 million per annum)

South Australia continues to experience significant difficulty accessing timely healthcare. Not only is South Australia's overall GP supply below the national average (107.4 vs 114.2 GP FTE per 100,000), but there is also a significant uneven distribution of GPs across the state. South Australia's MM2 outer metro areas have only 67.4 GP FTEs per 100,000 compared with 122.8 nationally, MM3 large rural town areas have 122.2 vs 140.2 nationally, and MM4 medium rural towns have 121.6 vs 136.6 nationally. Workforce shortages directly contribute to poorer health outcomes, delayed care, and an increased reliance on public hospital emergency departments. While general practice training numbers are improving, targeted short-term workforce initiatives are urgently required to resolve immediate gaps in outer metro and rural communities.

Initiative 1.1: International Medical Graduate Incentive Grants

($2.8 million per annum)

International Medical Graduates (IMGs) represent a crucial and cost-effective source of general practitioners in South Australia. However, IMGs face substantial establishment barriers, including high relocation costs, administrative fees, and orientation hurdles. RACGP SA recommends providing targeted financial grants to assist IMGs relocating to, training in, and remaining in communities of greatest need, and encourage them to choose SA rather than other states. By supporting relocation, professional development and community orientation, this initiative will increase the likelihood that internationally trained GPs remain in their communities long term, strengthening workforce stability and continuity of care for local patients.

Structure: 70 x $40,000 IMG Incentive Grants

Initiative 1.2: GP Supervisor Support Payments

($0.7 million per annum)

GP supervisors play a critical role in training, mentoring, and retaining the next generation of doctors, while also supporting the orientation and integration of international medical graduates (IMGs). As IMGs are unable to practise independently without supervision, supervisory capacity is essential to workforce expansion. However, the significant administrative burden, time commitment, and loss of clinical income associated with supervision can discourage participation by already stretched practices and supervisors. Dedicated financial support would help expand supervisory capacity, strengthen training pathways, and improve workforce retention within local communities.

Structure: 70 x $10,000 Incentive Payments for supervisors

Initiative 1.3: Metro-to-Rural Practice Program

($0.5 million per annum)

Many rural practices currently rely on expensive locum doctors to maintain basic services. Locums provide short-term relief but cannot deliver the continuity of care that drives positive health outcomes. This initiative will establish a structured rostered pathway to enable metropolitan specialist GPs to provide regular, scheduled visits, telehealth follow-up to regional practices and to form relationships with South Australian rural patients. This model provides leave relief, reduces locum expenditure, and enhances continuity of care for rural patients.

Priority 2: Statewide Non-GP Specialist Advice - Program ($2.0 million per annum)

A Statewide Non-GP Specialist Advice Program will ensure more South Australians receive health advice from their GP who knows them and their history. Likewise, patients will avoid lengthy wait times for non-GP specialist advice and the inconvenience of having to travel to hospital for an outpatient appointment. Patients seeking non-GP specialist advice often must take time off work and rely on family for transport. To enable GPs to continuously open and expand their scope of clinical practice, general practice must be seamlessly integrated with public hospital specialist expertise. Currently, more than half of GPs report difficulty accessing timely specialist advice, frequently forcing unnecessary outpatient referrals or emergency department presentations.

Program model and operational mechanics

RACGP SA proposes a $2.0 million per annum statewide pilot program modelled on Western Australia's successful GP Access to Hospital Specialist Knowledge (GP ASK) initiative and Queensland's eConsultant Program. The platform will enable specialist GPs to access rapid consultant-level advice with a timely written response from the non-GP specialist. or a virtual case discussion. The model would support GPs to maintain primary clinical responsibility for the patient in the community, relieving systemic pressure on the hospital system.

The pilot could focus initially on two high-demand specialties:

- **Geriatric Medicine:** Supporting GPs to manage frailty, cognitive impairment, and complex multimorbidity, keeping older South Australians comfortably cared for at home or in residential aged care facilities, reducing costly bed blocking.
- **Respiratory Medicine**: Assisting GPs in optimising management of severe asthma, COPD, and respiratory infections, preventing acute exacerbations and hospital admissions.

Expected system impacts

Implementation of the Non-GP Specialist Advice Program will:

- **Reduce outpatient waiting lists** by diverting cases that can be safely managed in general practice with consultant guidance.

- **Decrease avoidable ED presentations** by providing immediate clinical guidance for deteriorating or complex community patients.
- **Empower GP scope of practice** by upskilling primary care clinicians through regular case-based non-GP specialist collaboration.
- **Improved access and convenience for patients,** from a GP who knows them and their history, closer to home.

About RACGP South Australia

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) is the peak professional body representing more than 50,000 members nationally, including more than 4,000 specialist GPs, general practice registrars, and medical students across South Australia. In South Australia, 3,120 practising specialist GPs across more than 480 general practices deliver more than 11 million consultations annually to over 1.6 million residents. The RACGP currently supports 350 GPs in training across the state, ensuring a sustainable pipeline for South Australia's future health workforce.

A targeted $6.0 million annual investment offers one of the most cost-effective opportunities available to the South Australian Government to address escalating health system pressures. Strengthening general practice capacity, particularly in rural and regional communities, will help reduce avoidable emergency department presentations, prevent conditions from deteriorating into more complex and costly illnesses, improve hospital patient flow, and support a sustainable medical workforce. This investment delivers benefits across the entire health system, relieving pressure on ambulances, emergency departments, hospital beds, and specialist services while improving access to care closer to home.