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1. Introduction

It is widely recognised that the general practice (GP) services provided by non-vocationally recognised medical practitioners, are critical to the maintenance of primary health care for people in country areas. The intent of the Rural Other Medical Practitioners (ROMPs) Programme is to recognise the value of services provided by doctors in rural and remote areas and provide substantial financial benefits for their patients.

The ROMPs Programme will extend the full Medicare rebate to eligible non-vocationally recognised medical practitioners, who provide GP services in designated rural and remote areas of Australia, and who express an interest in undertaking a pathway to Fellowship of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) or the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM).

Under the ROMPs Programme, patients in rural and remote areas will be eligible for the higher (A1) Medicare rebate when they visit their local GP, regardless of whether the doctor is vocationally recognised. Veterans' Affairs patients are included in this initiative.

The ROMPs Programme commenced in January 2001, and is administered by Medicare Australia on behalf of the Department of Health.

2. Eligibility Requirements

To be eligible for the ROMPs Programme doctors must:

- be non-vocationally recognised (also known as Other Medical Practitioners (OMPs)); and
- agree to express an interest in achieving Fellowship of the RACGP or the ACRRM.

A doctor must also be providing services in any of the following designated locations:

- Rural, Remote Metropolitan Area (RRMA) classifications 4-7;
- Defined ‘areas of consideration’; or
- Approved RRMA 3 locations which have significant medical workforce shortages (as deemed eligible by the Departmental Delegate).

OMPs include:

- Salaried doctors
- Medical Graduates
- Overseas Trained Doctors
- Temporary Resident Doctors
- Special Interest Practitioners who wish to specialise in general practice
- Doctors providing GP services in RRMA 4-7 through the Rural Locum Relief Programmes and the State Overseas Trained Doctors initiative.

Salaried doctors, who are eligible to obtain a provider number and attract Medicare benefits for their services, and who relocate or provide ongoing services in designated locations may be eligible for the ROMPs Programme.

Medical Graduates who are not eligible to attract Medicare Benefits except via the Rural Locum Relief Programme, the Queensland Rural Locum Relief Programme or the Approved Medical Deputising Services Programme, may be eligible for the ROMPs Programme if providing ongoing services in designated locations.

Overseas Trained Doctors must fulfil immigration and State or Territory medical board requirements and have access to Medicare benefits at the location to be eligible for the ROMPs Programme.

Temporary Resident Doctors who are meeting ‘short-term’ workforce needs in rural and remote communities may take part in the ROMPs Programme.
To be eligible for the ROMPs Programme, applicants must express an interest in undertaking one of the pathways to obtain vocational recognition. Applicants should be aware that they will be required to commence training in due course if they wish to maintain their eligibility for this Programme.

It is important to note that the Programme does not reduce or waive any restriction on accessing Medicare benefits that would apply to a doctor practising in Australia.

3. Eligible Areas

The ROMPs Programme will apply to rural and remote areas classified using the RRMA Classification system (1991 Census Edition). RRMA classifies all statistical local areas according to an index of remoteness, based on population density and distances to large population centres.

Areas are classified from 1 (Capital) to 7 (Other Remote Area). The ROMPs Programme will apply to areas classified as RRMA 4-7. In general, RRMA 4-7 classifications cover small rural centres (population of less than 25,000 people), remote centres and smaller rural and remote areas. It is important to note that the distance of the location from major metropolitan areas is a significant factor in determining the RRMA classification. As a result, small rural centres in close proximity to major metropolitan areas may not fall within the RRMA 4-7 range.

On 1 July 2004, the Australian Government extended certain general practice workforce programmes, including the ROMPs Programme, to ‘areas of consideration’ through enhancements to the Strengthening Medicare package. Areas of consideration are areas that are not classified RRMA 4-7 locations but exhibit the characteristics of rural areas. Therefore, any location in an ‘area of consideration’ is now considered an eligible location for the purposes of the ROMPs Programme.

From 2 April 2007, the Australian Government further extended the ROMPs Programme to address medical workforce shortages in rural areas. At the discretion of the Departmental Delegate RRMA 3 locations with significant workforce shortages can be deemed eligible areas for the purposes of the ROMPs Programme. Upon there being a reduction in the acute shortages referred to, the Departmental Delegate will exercise their discretion, as appropriate, and reverse this temporary eligibility for these communities to access this Programme. OMPs already accessing the A1 Medicare rebate through the ROMPs Programme at that time will be able to continue to access the higher Medicare rebate, until such time that they move out of these areas. New doctors after that time will not be able to access the higher Medicare rebate unless they are vocationally recognised.

On the basis of the above, currently the approved areas for the ROMPs Programme are RRMA 4-7 locations, ‘areas of consideration’ and approved RRMA 3 locations.
4. Delegate’s Discretion

The Departmental Delegate for the ROMPs Programme will have full discretion to make decisions on all matters in relation to the administration of the Programme, including but not limited to approval of locations and medical practitioners.

5. The Registration Process

Eligible OMPs should complete the ROMPs Registration Form and return it to the South Australian Office of the Department of Human Services (DHS) - Medicare. DHS will determine eligibility as part of the assessment process of the application for the ROMPs Programme.

Additional Registration Forms are available from the Department of Health, DHS or your local Rural Workforce Agency.

Payment of Medicare benefits at the higher rebate level will commence from the date recorded by DHS and written notification will be sent to the eligible participant.

Once the Registration Form is processed by DHS, eligible participants will be issued with letter confirming their status on the ROMPs Programme and listing eligible locations, as well as the period of registration at those locations and the date from which the Group A1 items can be claimed. As this letter may take some time to reach participants, it is advised that doctors who wish to quickly confirm their registration should phone DHS Provider Eligibility Section in South Australia on 1800 032 259.

The period of registration on the ROMPs Programme will be granted in line with the OMPs access to Medicare benefits, as this Programme alone does not give access to Medicare benefits. The ROMPs Programme only allows eligible OMPs to access the Group A1 attendance items of the Medicare Benefits Schedule if they already have access to Medicare benefits.

If an OMP has restricted access to Medicare benefits, DHS will automatically extend their ROMPs Programme approval for eligible locations, in line with their continued access to Medicare benefits.

6. Pathways to Vocational Recognition

The pathways to vocational recognition in general practice are:

1. attaining Fellowship of the RACGP (FRACGP); and
2. attaining Fellowship of the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (FACRRM).

To be vocationally recognised doctors are also required to participate in continuing professional development.

**Pathways to RACGP Fellowship**

Attaining Fellowship of the RACGP entails the satisfactory completion of the RACGP assessment process which consists of an examination or practice-based assessment. There are a number of pathways leading to FRACGP. These are listed below.

**Australian General Practice Training Programme**

Doctors that are successful in the merit based selection process can undertake the Australian General Practice Training Programme managed by General Practice Education and Training (GPET) Ltd. The Training Programme is limited to 600 places each year. General practice registrars are required to undertake an educational programme, complete between 12 and 16 approved training units in accredited teaching practices over 3-4 years, and the RACGP assessment. The training is delivered on a regional basis by a variety of providers, either individually or as a consortium. Further information about the GPET training programme can be obtained on email GPET (gpet@gpet.com.au) or by telephone on (02) 6263 6777.
Practice Eligible Route
FRACGP can also be obtained by the practice eligible route, which requires seven years postgraduate experience including five years general practice experience and satisfactory completion of the RACGP assessment process. This pathway may be attractive to medical practitioners who have been practicing for some time. Further information about the practice eligible route can be obtained from the RACGP website at www.racgp.org.au or by telephone on 1800 472 247.

The RACGP has developed a six month General Practice Recognition Educational Programme to help eligible doctors prepare to attain FRACGP. This programme is likely to be of particular value to those doctors who choose to pursue the practice eligible route. Further information about this programme is available from the RACGP website at www.racgp.org.au or by telephone on 1800 472 247.

Pathways to ACRRM Fellowship
From April 2007, FACRRM was recognised as an alternative pathway to vocational recognition under Medicare. To be eligible for vocational recognition a doctor must:

1. successfully complete ACRRM’s accredited training programme and assessments;
2. successfully be assessed as having skills and experience equivalent to a graduate of ACRRM’s accredited training programme.

Attaining fellowship of ACRRM requires satisfactory completion of the ACRRM’s accredited training programme and assessments and participation in ACRRM’s Professional Development Programme.

ACRRM is also revising its practice based route to fellowship. When this is finalised and approved, it will be available as an alternative pathway to fellowship.

For further information, contact ACRRM for training towards FACRRM and requirements of the ACRRM for continuing professional development on 1800 223 226 or by email ACRRM (acrrm@acrrm.org.au); or GPET for information about training towards FACRRM by email GPET (gpet@gpet.com.au) or on (02) 6263 6777.

Remote Vocational Training Scheme (to obtain FRACGP and/or FACRRM)
The Remote Vocational Training Scheme (RVTS) is run by RVTS Ltd. The RVTS provides a flexible general training pathway to vocational recognition for doctors who work in remote areas and solo practices and who may find that leaving their practice to undertake the Australian General Practice Training Programme is not a viable option. The RVTS Board comprises representation from both the RACGP and ACRRM.

Each year, 15 new places are offered with registrars participating in remote supervision and utilising a range of distance learning techniques as well as regular face to face sessions. At present participants are able to attain FRACGP and/or FACRRM.

7. Changes to Medicare Benefits Item Numbers
At present, all OMPs with access to Medicare benefits and who provide GP services bill under the Group A2 items of the Medicare benefits schedule.

OMP's in eligible areas, who register on the ROMPs Programme, will be able to bill all items under the Group A1 items of the Medicare benefits schedule for all GP services, including those services provided to eligible veterans *.

For example, a standard consultation, previously billed as item number 53 will be billed as item number 23 by an OMP who has registered in the ROMPs Programme.

* To be eligible for payment of Medicare rebates at the 100% level (of either the A1 or A2 Schedule) when treating Veterans’ Affairs patients, doctors should seek to register with the Department of Veterans’ Affairs as a Local Medical Officer (LMO) by phoning 1800 555 254.
8. Provider Numbers

A Medicare provider number uniquely identifies a medical practitioner and location from which services are provided. The Provider number is used for claiming purposes to determine the level of rebate applicable.

If the OMP already has a provider number for the practice location on their ROMPs application form they will not need to apply for a new provider number for that location. If they do not already have a provider number for the practice location, they must also complete an application form for a provider number which is available on Medicare Australia’s website.

If the OMP wants to register for ROMPs at a new eligible location, a separate ROMPs registration is required for each location.

9. The Role of the Rural Workforce Agencies

The Rural Workforce Agencies (RWAs) are working closely with the Department of Health on the ROMPs Programme. The RWAs are available to provide information on the ROMPs Programme and to provide assistance in the registration process. Please note, that the RWAs are unable to make policy decisions regarding the ROMPs Programme.

Your local Rural Workforce Agency may be contacted on the numbers below.

**New South Wales**
- NSW Rural Doctors Network (02) 4924 8000

**Northern Territory**
- Medicare Local (08) 8982 1000

**Queensland**
- Health Workforce Queensland (07) 3105 7800

**South Australia**
- Rural Doctors Workforce Agency (08) 8234 8277

**Victoria**
- Rural Workforce Agency Victoria Ltd (03) 9349 7800

**Tasmania**
- Health Recruitment Plus (03) 6334 2355

**Western Australia**
- Rural Health West (08) 6389 4500

10. Further Information

For further information about the ROMPs Programme, or to find out whether the practice you are working in, or will be relocating to, is in an eligible location for the purposes of the ROMPs Programme, contact Medicare Australia on 1800 032 259.

For enquiries about ROMPs payments, contact DHS on 1800 032 259 or by email at: PROVIDER.REGISTRATION@humanservices.gov.au

Officers of the Department of Health and DHS have no discretion to alter RRMA classifications.

**Please note** the ROMPs Programme is subject to change or termination at any time, depending on Government policy.