



**Hon Stephen Robertson MP**  
Member for Stretton

2 April 2007

Mr Neil Laurie  
The Clerk of the Parliament  
Parliament House  
George Street  
BRISBANE QLD 4000



**Queensland  
Government**

Minister for Health



LAI'D UPON THE TABLE OF THE HOUSE  
THE CLERK OF THE PARLIAMENT

Dear Mr Laurie

Thank you for your letter of 27 March 2007 in regards to a response to Petition No 736-06 from the Minister for Health and Ageing, Hon Tony Abbot MP, concerning Runaway Bay being identified as a District of Workforce Shortage.

As the issue raised by the Petitioners is the responsibility of the Federal Government I hereby request that you allow the tabling of the attached response from the Honourable Tony Abbot MP, Minister for Health and Ageing.

Yours sincerely

**STEPHEN ROBERTSON MP**

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**Australian Government**  
**Department of Health and Ageing**

Mr Neil Laurie  
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Dear Mr Laurie

I refer to your letter of 3 November 2006 to the Queensland Minister for Health, the Hon Stephen Robertson MP, regarding Petition number 736-06 concerning the supply of GPs in Runaway Bay and a request that the Commonwealth Government declare this area a district of workforce shortage to enable the engagement of more doctors. The Hon Stephen Robertson MP forwarded the petition to the Hon Tony Abbott MP, the Minister for Health and Ageing, for a response directly to you. I am responding on the Ministers behalf.

The central issue raised in the petition, that of declaring Runaway Bay a district of workforce shortage, relates to the engagement of overseas trained doctors (OTDs).

OTDs are subject to section 19AB of the *Health Insurance Act 1973* (the Act) which requires them to work in a district of workforce shortage in order to access the Medicare benefits arrangements. A district of workforce shortage is a geographical area in which the community is considered to have less access to medical services than that experienced by the population in general, either because of the remote nature of the community or because of the lack of services or a combination of the two factors.

A doctor to population ratio is frequently used to help determine whether a locality is within a district of workforce shortage. This ratio is based on recent Medicare billing statistics for Statistical Local Areas (SLAs) or collections of contiguous SLAs. In using the Medicare billing statistics, my Department uses a full-time equivalent measure which takes into account Medicare billing in the area irrespective of whether or not local doctors are working in a part-time or a full-time capacity. The Medicare billing statistics and the doctor to population ratios are updated on a quarterly basis.

Currently, the SLA of Runaway Bay (and the Gold Coast region as a whole), has a doctor to population ratio which is significantly better than the national average and is therefore not considered to be a district of workforce shortage for the purposes of recruiting OTDs subject to the Medicare provider number restrictions under section 19AB of the Act. While I am sympathetic to the needs of medical practices in Runaway Bay, my Department must balance this with the needs of communities with significantly less access to medical services such as rural and remote areas.

However, the Government recognises that the provision of medical services in the after-hours period is a temporal district of workforce shortage. Therefore, practices in Runaway Bay are eligible to recruit OTDs to work in the after-hours period regardless of their district of workforce shortage status.

You may be interested to know that my Department has contracted several recruitment agencies to assist practices in recruiting suitably qualified doctors. A list of the recruitment agencies can be viewed on the DoctorConnect web site at [www.doctorconnect.gov.au](http://www.doctorconnect.gov.au). Practices in Runaway Bay are welcome to contact any of the agencies on this list should they require assistance in recruiting doctors to their practices. I have also been advised that upwards of 15 OTDs are already working at Runaway Bay and the immediate surrounding regions which indicates that sometime in the past, Runaway Bay and its environs had district of workforce shortage status and was able to engage OTDs.

The Government is making a substantial investment in the supply, education and training of more doctors to address this problem. As a result of investment in medical schools since 2000, the Government has increased the number of publicly funded medical school places by more than 80%. The Government has recently also announced its support for the establishment of four additional medical schools in Australia.

However, the Government recognises that there is a substantial time lag between the commencement of medical studies and independent practice as a specialist or GP. Therefore, the Government will continue to use other workforce programs to ensure a supply of GPs where they are needed most. This includes the ongoing use of the Medicare provider number legislation affecting OTDs.

I trust that this information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely

David Dennis  
Assistant Secretary  
Workforce Distribution Branch  
16 March 2007