

13 December 2019

The Chairperson  
Consultative Committee for the Future Drought Fund  
Department of Agriculture  
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Mr. Finlay

**Re: Strategic priority - Social resilience for resourceful and adaptable communities**

HealthWISE is a for purpose organisation delivering mental health, allied health and Aboriginal health services across northern New South Wales and parts of southern Queensland.

Recruitment and retention of health and medical professionals is an important issue for rural communities and the challenge is heightened in times of drought and economic downturn.

HealthWISE proposes that initiatives such as the William Hunter Scholarship, based in the Moree Plains Local Government Area, and administered by the Barwon Health Alliance, be supported and replicated across regional Australia as part of the Drought Resilience Fund.

The William Hunter Scholarship is awarded annually to a student from the district of Moree, Bingara, Warialda, or Collarenebri as a means of addressing the retention of rural health professionals in rural communities.

Over its 15 year history, the scholarship has supported 24 students including nurses, physiotherapists, doctors, speech pathologists, radiology technicians, pharmacists and dietitians.

Applicants must be in their second year or above of an undergraduate medical, allied health or, nursing degree at any Australian university. To receive the scholarship the successful recipient agrees to spend two weeks at a student placement in the Moree Plains LGA. The scholarship is paid in three instalments over the course of the academic year and assists with rent, books, travel and associated university costs.

The Drought Resilience funding plan states that future funding initiatives of the Drought Resilience fund should have benefits that can be accessed or shared by many. A scholarship program across rural Australia would provide support for multiple students and upon completion of studies, and return to rural practice, wider communities would have access to local health professionals.

These scholarships have *co-investment* from the student as they do not cover all costs of fees and living expenses. In addition there are *expected public benefits*, at a *regional level*, with *enduring outcomes*.

An initiative of the Drought Resilience fund that enabled greater numbers of health professionals to be located in rural areas would lessen the time and financial commitments required to access services during periods of drought when responsibilities such as hand feeding do not allow for travel.

Your funding plan touched on the expected future impacts of climate change. In addition to adaptations in agricultural production, changes in climate will also require changes to the health management of all Australians. Accessing local advice in regards to physical and mental health will be crucial for social wellbeing. Putting in place initiatives to provide access to services every week of every year should strengthen the resilience of communities inside and outside of drought.

HealthWISE welcomes the development of the Future Drought Fund to enhance the resilience of Australian communities. Including programs to allow better access to health services should assist the fund in achieving its objective to *improve the wellbeing and social fabric of rural and regional communities*.

Yours sincerely



Anne Williams

Acting CEO