



**West Australian**  
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CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

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# A healthy fair go for all in WA

**Tim Shackleton**

Seven years. That's the difference in average life expectancy between someone living in a metropolitan area and those living in the most remote locations in WA.

West Australians love the idea of a fair go for all. But there is little fair about living seven years fewer than your city cousins.

As we prepare to celebrate WA Day, let's spend some time to ponder why there is such huge inequality between city and country.

The reasons are complex and diverse, however a significant contributor is the disparity in access to healthcare. As a whole, WA has more than its fair share of challenges when it comes to health and medical care. We have the lowest ratio of general practitioners per person in Australia. We have the lowest level of Medicare use per person and one of the lowest levels of bulk-billing.

The situation in rural WA is even tougher. GP to population ratios vary, but many small towns rely on a solo GP and some have no local GP or visiting service. Many country people travel great distances to access primary healthcare and others travel even further should they need specialist healthcare.

Difficult situations breed ingenious solutions and fortunately we West Australians are a hardy and innovative lot.

One WA innovation bridging the healthcare divide (and gaining international attention) is the Emergency Telehealth Service, established by the WA Country Health Service. The

ETS links rural hospital staff treating critically ill and injured patients with the State's most experienced emergency physicians via videoconferencing technology, providing patients with access to highly skilled critical care in their hour of need. It's had a massive impact on the treatment and care of our sickest patients across the State.

Telehealth, via videoconferencing, also has applications in less critical scenarios, helping to overcome the poor economies of scale and the isolation of many small communities, which prevent them from attracting and retaining GPs. Telehealth can make an enormous difference in delivering healthcare equity, and medical professionals are more and more willing to embrace it.

Rural Health West recently conducted research with GPs working in rural WA to determine their attitude and readiness to embrace new digital technologies. Of the GPs interviewed, 73 per cent are using videoconferencing in some capacity, 73 per cent are using other digital health systems and nearly half are using technology to connect their country patients to metropolitan-based services.

The greatest barriers to extending this uptake are the continuing challenges of internet connectivity and reliability in more rural and remote areas and the mismatch between the patient-driven demand for new technologies and Medicare funding.

As a result, Rural Health West has partnered with the WA Primary Health Alliance

and Western Australian General Practice Education and Training to address this mismatch. We have jointly prepared a submission asking the Federal Government to introduce a Medicare billing item to support the use of videoconferencing for people living in communities who do

not have a resident GP or who live in a community that does not have a regular visiting GP service.

Eight communities and 2200 West Australians live more than 50km from their nearest GP service. That's eight communities and 2200 West Australians who don't have access to the level of basic healthcare that 2.5 million of us take for granted.

Giving these communities bulk-billed access to a GP via videoconferencing will have a significant positive impact on their health, enable early intervention with patients with chronic disease and deliver an overall cost saving to the public health system by decreasing preventable presentations to local hospitals.

Another model working well to improve healthcare access has been the Royalties for Regions-funded Southern Inland Health Initiative. This half-billion dollar initiative has made enormous inroads into improving the viability and attractiveness of running a general practice in many small towns throughout the Mid West, Wheatbelt and Great Southern regions. A key aspect of the project has been providing greater financial support for GPs in hard-to-staff locations, which has helped attract and retain doctors in these towns.



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At the start of SIHI in 2011, there were just 46 GPs servicing the Wheatbelt; by the end of 2016, there were 83 GPs working in the region — a massive 80 per cent increase. We are calling for government to safeguard funding for SIHI and ensure the continued progress towards equality of access to healthcare across the State.

These are just a selection of the solutions working to bridge the city-country health divide in WA, but there are countless others — ensuring our rural GPs maintain their procedural skills, the continuing promotion of rural careers to medical and health students and greater intakes of country students into medical programs. The critical element underpinning each of these

initiatives is that our WA agencies are committed to sharing information, sharing resources and working together to ensure that everyone, everywhere across the State has access to quality healthcare.

So this WA Day, spare a thought for the people in communities without the same level of healthcare most of us enjoy and the importance of making sure everyone in WA gets equal treatment.

■ Tim Shackleton is the chief executive officer of Rural Health West and has extensive experience in the rural and regional health sector in WA, previously holding senior roles with the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the WA Country Health Service



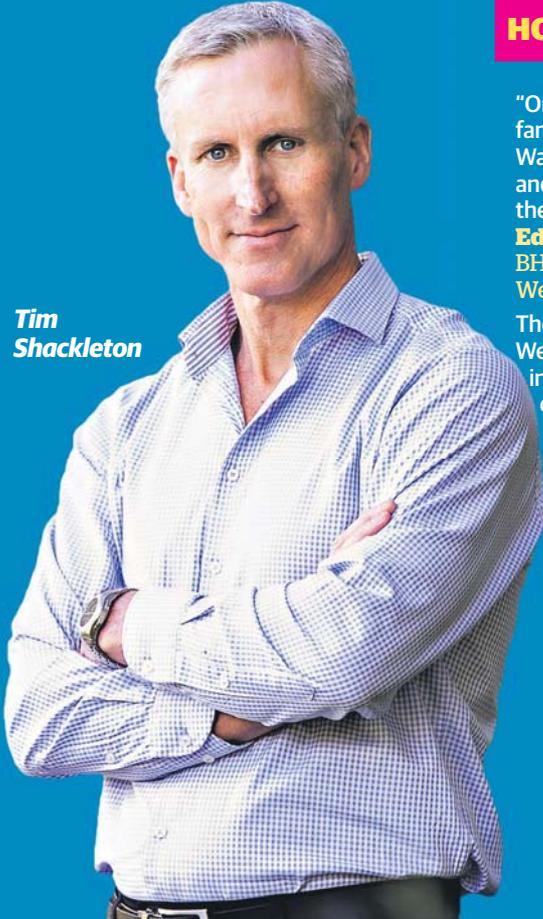
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**HOW ARE YOU PLANNING TO SPEND WA DAY?**

"On Sunday I plan to take my family to see the Wadjemup Walk Trail on Rottnest Island and on WA Day I am going to the Festival at Elizabeth Quay."  
**Edgar Basto**  
BHP Asset President,  
Western Australian Iron Ore  
The vivid colours of the Western Australian coastline inspire my work and hit me every time I sail along the coast and Swan River. WA Day is a great time to celebrate the richness and beauty of this great State."  
**Stuart Bishop**  
CEO, Hardy Brothers Jewellers

"Coles has been a proud member of the community in WA for decades. We are passionate about helping West Australians through organisations such as Telethon, local schools and sporting clubs. Our team is made up of very passionate West Australians that thrive on being part of the community and celebrating everything that is great about our State, especially on WA Day."  
**Mark O'Connor**  
State Manager, WA Coles



**Monday June 5 is your WA Day**  
Let's celebrate being West Australian

Share how you'll be spending WA Day on **Facebook, Twitter or Instagram** using **#WADay** and visit [waday.com](http://waday.com) to find out more about WA Day festivities across the State