



Keynote address

[The Hon Tony Abbott](#), Federal Minister for Health

FACILITATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure now to welcome the Minister for Health, Tony Abbott. And as he approaches – and a round of applause please for those who are leaving the official stage at this time. As I'm sure many of you know, Tony Abbott has been appearing regularly on the Today show on channel nine, sometimes debating Julia Gillard as I understand it, the Opposition's Deputy Leader. And I recently was in Julia Gillard's office in the House in Canberra to interview her for a women's magazine, it'll be out next month, and I just want to let the Minister know that in her office is a pair of boxing gloves and glued onto the front of each glove is a picture of your head. Now, frankly, she's dicing with death because I think you got a Blue at Oxford in boxing or something like that, so I think he's safe, but is she? Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the Minister for Health, Tony Abbott.

HON TONY ABBOTT: Your 52-year-old knees couldn't do it, Julie. My 49-year-old knees just about did it. Look, you know, that was the nearest she got to laying a glove on me, I've got to say, laying a glove on the photograph. But I have to say that I have enjoyed my jousts with Julia Gillard, and I look forward to continuing them in my current capacity and her new capacity.

But, look, it's great to be here. It's great to see so many people who are very enthusiastic about rural health. It's good to be in the presence of the local member, my friend and colleague, Sussan Ley, who is the Parliamentary Secretary for Agriculture. Did I notice Senator Kate Lundy down there? Kate, good to see you here too.

And, of course, I am just so pleased to be in the presence of Her Excellency, the Governor of New South Wales. Marie Bashir is a legend, not just in her vice-regal role, but she is, of course, a legend in the field of health and medicine. I suppose as an incorrigible supporter of the Crown I am particularly pleased to be in the presence of the Governor, but I'm also very pleased to have one of my constituents here. When you are in your home of Mosman, Marie, you're one of – you're in my parish, but anywhere in New South Wales I'm in your parish, so I thank you for making me so welcome here in beautiful Albury.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think it's great that all of us are here at a conference with the theme, "Standing Up For Rural Health," because, you know, for far too long we did not do enough for the health of country people. For far too long a gap was widening between the health outcomes of people living in the city and people living in the country.

Now, I don't say that we have solved all the problems, I suspect we will never solve some of the problems, but I do think that, together, because of the efforts of all levels of government, in particular because of the efforts of health professionals right around this country, we are making a difference and I think we can say confidently, perhaps for the first time in generations, that things are on the whole getting better and not getting worse in this area.

I'd like to very briefly, if I may, remind you of some of the things that the Federal Government is doing to improve rural health services. We're spending \$800 million on our Rural Health Strategy, and under that strategy for the first time the Federal Government is providing the kind of community health facilities which federal governments have never before been in the business of providing.

We have opened, as many of you would know, 14 rural clinical schools right around Australia in our major country centres which are strongly improving our health and medical infrastructure and giving senior health professionals and specialists more reason to live and work in country areas. There are 11 university departments of rural health in country centres around Australia because we aren't just focusing on doctors, which has perhaps been the traditional wont of governments, but we think that it is important that we have a whole range of health professionals providing services to people in country areas.

As many of you would know, we are trying to make it more worth health professionals' while to practise in country areas, particularly through initiatives such as the rural retention payments. But, you know, it's all very well to be making sure that health professionals are earning more. It's all very well to be training more health professionals and getting more of them into the country. It's all very well to be encouraging more team care, but if health services are not affordable what is the point?

And one of the things that I am most proud of in my time as Health Minister is the resurgence in bulk billing rates. I'm pleased to say that thanks to the bulk billing incentive payments which this government has put in place, the bulk billing rates in country areas are now at an all-time high. Certainly, there have been times when the Howard Government has been accused of being uninterested in Medicare. There have been times when the Howard Government has been accused of being against bulk billing. Well, thanks to the policies of this government the bulk billing rate in country Australia is at an all-time high and I say, judge us by our results, judge us by our results, and if bulk billing is important for country people no government has done better by the country people of Australia than this current government.

But even though we are as a government interested in using the market and private professionals to help, even though we believe that the market has an absolutely vital role in the provision of health services, we accept, as all sensible people should, that markets sometimes fail. They particularly fail where there aren't enough private professionals to make them work. And so in almost all of our initiatives we have included important components, designed to ensure that there are salaried positions and contracted positions available to support those health professionals who are not there in sufficient numbers to support our traditional fee-for-service system.

Our mental health package, our \$1.9 billion mental health package, which is so important to so many of you here, includes a \$51 million component to ensure that there are psychological services available under this package in areas without private psychologists. This complements our longstanding, More Allied Health Services program. This complements the Better Outcomes in Mental Health Program, which has put so many allied health professionals particularly into the country areas of Australia.

And as Her Excellency, The Governor, has just reminded us, at the heart of the delivery of good health services in our country areas has got to be the delivery of better health services to Indigenous people. Again, the Howard Government is not often credited for having a deep and abiding concern to improve the welfare of Aboriginal people, and yet certainly in the area of health, no government has done more than this one to try to deliver better services.

Back in 1996 just \$100 million was spent in that year on Indigenous-specific health services. In the current financial year some \$377 million will be spent on Indigenous-specific health services. Back in 1996 Indigenous people made use of Medicare and the PBS at about 40 per cent of the general rate. Today they are making use of those mainstream health services at about 60 per cent of the general rate. It's still too low, there is still so much more to be done, but these are big improvements. I think that we have in a sense crossed the divide in important respects thanks to the efforts that the government has made to make these important universal health programs more accessible to our Indigenous fellow Australians.

So as I said, I think we have done a lot over the years to help, but in the end it's not what you do that counts, it's why you do it. And we must deliver better health services to country Australians because they deserve to share in the benefits of being Australian every bit as much as everyone else. There is a fundamental question of justice here. It is simply unjust not to have reasonable health delivery, reasonable health access for country Australians.

But it's more than just a question of justice. In the end our whole sense of what it is to be an Australian is shaped by that ethos of the bush. If there are a few abiding motifs to the Australian identity, one of them is the bushy, and if we ever got to a situation where the country people of Australia were living markedly shorter lives, were enjoying markedly lesser health outcomes, it would be something of a travesty given the importance of the bush in that ethos of what it is and what it means to be an Australian.





The idea of the quintessential Australian being someone dying in his or her sixties, incapable for the last few years of his or her life to engage in robust physical activity because of a failure to provide good health services, I think is just ludicrous, and the last thing we'd want to see is future generations of country Australians enjoying much poorer health than their city cousins.

I am delighted that so many people have come together to talk about rural health, to analyse what's going right, what's going wrong, where we can try to do better, but I am particularly pleased, as obviously you are, Julie, as I'm sure Her Excellency, The Governor, is also pleased, to see so many young people involved in rural health and involved in this conference.

As I was able to say earlier today, as the Health Minister I am often told by grumpy old doctors how hard it is to get young people into the practice of medicine and other health professionals in country areas, and I don't for a second deny that there are certain barriers that have yet to be overcome when it comes to attracting young people into country health practice, but nevertheless, it is tremendously exhilarating, tremendously exhilarating to see so many young people here.

And it is also tremendously exhilarating to see that of the young people that old class distinction between doctors up here and everyone else down there seems to be dissolving. As far as these young professionals, or young professionals of the future are concerned, it's all health, it's all important, and everyone has an important part to play in delivering better health services to the country people of Australia.

So, I'm very pleased to be here. I am honoured to be given this opportunity to second the remarks of Her Excellency, The Governor, and to help in also declaring this important conference officially open.

Presenter

Tony Abbott was elected Member for Warringah at a by-election in March 1994. Prior to entering Parliament he was Executive Director of Australians for Constitutional Monarchy from 1993 to 1994. From 1990 to 1993 he was press secretary and political advisor to the Leader of the Opposition, Dr John Hewson. His previous career was in journalism, where he wrote as a feature writer for *The Bulletin* and *The Australian*.

Tony was appointed Minister for Health and Ageing on the 7 October 2003.

He lives in Forestville with wife Margaret and three daughters.

