MEDIA RELEASE

Financial incentives, flexibility and safe living needed to retain remote health care workers

21 July 2026

Appropriate housing and safety, adequate time off, and financial incentives have been revealed as some of the key drivers that support primary health care workers to remain in remote jobs across Australia, according to a new study by Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies).

Published in *BMC Health Services Research*, the findings share the importance of bundling initiatives preferred by remote health care workers into a comprehensive, flexible workforce retention package, which are tailored to accommodate staff preferences.

This comes from the responses of more than 225 remote health care workers (of whom 71% worked for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Service), who ranked retention initiatives from best to worst.

Having adequate housing and a safe living environment was considered paramount by over 80% of respondents. The research team acknowledged this requires coordinated action from several sectors and departments, but has broad impacts on supporting cultural, professional, physical and psychological safety for health staff.

Financial incentives were the preferred retention initiative by non-Indigenous staff, whereas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff ranked First Nations leadership as the most important influence on remaining in their role. Leave flexibility, professional networks and wellbeing support were key for all staff, as these were listed within the top 5 retention initiatives for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous primary health care workers.

Retention opportunities that address the needs of all staff members are vital to support workforce stability. Previous research has shown that local Aboriginal staff are more likely to provide workforce stability in remote regions and have the cultural and language skills that are essential to facilitate cultural safety and effective communication. Local Aboriginal staff also have established relationships with community members, which supports trusting, interpersonal primary health care and deeper community engagement with healthcare initiatives.

The research team highlight that this study provides strong insights into preferred initiatives to support workforce retention policies and strategies for primary health care staff in remote Australia.

Tailoring retention initiatives to the preferences of staff helps limit turnover and support cultural safety as well as greater continuity of care for remote residents, who have the poorest health status and greatest health needs in the country.

Read the paper in full: https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-026-15095-9

Quotes attributable to lead author of the study and Menzies Research Fellow, Dr Nanda Kaji Budhathoki:
"Retaining the remote health workforce requires more than a single solution. Our research shows that health professionals have different priorities, so retention initiatives should be tailored to cater to the diverse needs and preferences of the workforce. By investing in what matters most to healthcare staff, we can build a more stable workforce and improve healthcare in remote communities"

Quotes attributable to Menzies Remote Health Workforce Program lead and Remote Health Systems and Climate Change Centre (RHC3) co-lead, Associate Professor, Deborah Russell:
"There is an ongoing remote primary health care workforce crisis in Australia, with severe shortages currently being experienced in many professions including for GPs, nurses and Aboriginal Health Practitioners.

"While attractive financial packages and employment conditions are important for over half the staff working in remote primary health care services, there is another group of staff members who are not motivated primarily by financial rewards. For this group, retention may best be supported by increased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in the health workforce, including in leadership positions, and better training opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to enable greater health workforce participation and career development."

Quotes attributable to co-author of the paper and Central Australian Aboriginal Congress Chief Medical Officer Public Health, Adjunct Professor John Boffa:
"Access to primary healthcare is helping to close the gap here in Central Australia, but the ability to continue to do this is dependent on being able to attract and retain workforce.

"Government projections show that the medical and nursing workforce will continue to decline in remote areas over the next decade. This is unacceptable. The situation is dire, and not just for health, but for all essential services in remote communities.

"Governments need to take note of these findings and then take action.

"Aboriginal leadership is key to a strong Aboriginal workforce. Further investment in Aboriginal community controlled health services is a key strategy to recruit and retain more Aboriginal staff.

"Money matters. Services need core funding that enables sufficient financial incentives. These must be well above rates paid in cities to have any impact.

"Finally, there needs to be a better way to fund effective health infrastructure, especially adequate, safe housing."

ENDS

Media Contact
Phone: (08) 8946 8680 **| Email:** media@menzies.edu.au

About Menzies School of Health Research
Menzies is at the forefront of health and medical research dedicated to improving the lives of peoples across the Northern Territory, Asia Pacific and beyond. By joining scientific knowledge with community wisdom, Menzies strives to Close the Gap, and shape a healthier, more equitable future where communities can thrive.

Top workforce retention initiatives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous primary health care staff in remote Australia:

Top workforce retention incentive preferences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff:	**Top workforce retention incentive preferences of non-Indigenous staff:**
• Increase First Nations leadership • Increase training and mentoring by local First Nations people • Increase support networks and wellbeing engagement* • Offer annual leave and flexible time-off* • Increase opportunities for promotion and/or advancement.	• Retention bonus for every 12 months of service • Offer annual leave and flexible time-off* • Support for training, higher education or research • Increase support networks and wellbeing engagement* • Increase my salary/income.

*Retention initiative valued by all staff
Read the findings in full: https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-026-15095-9