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## **Outages impact patient care – rural practice stocktake finding**



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Power outages and mobile phone failures have affected patient care during emergencies for about 40 per cent of rural general practices, the sector's first major stocktake survey indicates [Image: Amy Elting on Unsplash]

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Five rural practice respondents reported still having traditional copper wire-based broadband

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Nearly 40 per cent of rural practices report having had emergencies where mobile phone or power failures impacted patient care, including being unable to contact ambulance or on-call staff.

This is one of the findings of **the inaugural stocktake survey of rural general practices** by the Hauora Taiwhenua Rural Network.

Some 122 (63 per cent) of the 193 rural general practices responded to the survey, which covered topics from staffing and services to premises and connectivity.

## **Mobile outages' impact**

Forty-five practices (39.5 per cent) responding to the survey reported connectivity issues impacting care in emergencies, with the most common issue (23 practices) being mobile network outages stopping them from communicating with patients.

The next most common issue (12 practices) was connectivity outages stopping practices from communicating with ambulance, PRIME or on-call staff, followed closely by power outages (11 practices).

Five rural practice respondents reported still having traditional copper wire-based broadband, but the most common broadband source (82 practices) was fixed wireless broadband through a mobile phone provider. Only 15 practices reported having fibre broadband, and just one reported using a satellite service, such as Starlink.

Nine practices (8 per cent) reported having no mobile service option, 17 (15 per cent) only had access to a 3G service, while 63 practices (55 per cent) had access to 4G services, and the remaining 25 (22 per cent) had 5G.

**Patients' everyday care**

Forty practices (35 per cent) answered 'yes' to whether everyday connectivity was holding back their patients from accessing good health care.

The most common issue highlighted was patients having no mobile coverage (25 practices), followed by patients having no internet connection (16), an unreliable connection (6) or being unable to afford mobile or internet services (6).

Hauora Taiwhenua chair and specialist GP Fiona Bolden says she was surprised that only just over one-third of practice respondents reported that, in general, connectivity was affecting their patients' access to good healthcare.

"The connectivity is possibly better than we would have thought – but there is definitely still an issue around that," Dr Bolden says.

Three survey respondents reported their practices had unreliable internet connections/systems, and five reported being unable to provide telehealth services.

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