Patients across Australia will be able to access better health services closer to home under a $3 billion investment in health reform announced in the 2011-12 Budget.

Mental health services and regional and rural health infrastructure are the two largest investments in this responsible Budget, demonstrating the importance the Gillard Government places on improving services and support in these areas.

“This is the largest Commonwealth commitment to mental health services in Australia’s history,” said Minister for Health and Ageing, Nicola Roxon.

“The Gillard Government has delivered on its commitment to reform mental health services with a $2.2 billion Mental Health Reform Package containing new initiatives of $1.5 billion over five years to transform the sector and help thousands of Australians suffering from mental illness.

“Our mental health reforms will deliver better targeted, better coordinated and more comprehensive care for mental health patients and their families.”

The Budget will also continue to close the divide between regional and metropolitan health services by bringing the Government’s investment in health infrastructure to $1.8 billion to ensure people living in regional communities can enjoy first-class health care when and where they need it.

The regional funding includes 63 regional health projects, at a total cost of $1.33 billion, and $475 million provisioned for a second round of grants from the regional Health and Hospitals Fund.

The Health and Hospitals Fund grants in the budget will lead to improved health services and employment opportunities for people in regional Australia.

The grants will assist communities to build and expand health facilities and improve clinical training opportunities.

Minister Roxon said significant funding is also being provided in the Budget to allow timely access to diagnostic imaging services, a continuation of the bowel cancer screening program, and a boost to dental care.

Medicare will cover the cost of more Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scans, particularly in regional Australia where seven non-licensed MRI units will become eligible for Medicare benefits from November 2012.

“Importantly in this Budget, dental care will receive a $53.1 million boost with the establishment of a voluntary dental internship program to consolidate and expand
dental graduates' basic skills and improve community access to dental services,” Minister Roxon said.

An expert group will also be established to advise on the best way forward for dental health. In line with our agreement with the Australian Greens, the Government has committed that significant reforms to dental health will be a priority for the 2012-13 Budget. This group will help advise on the development of those reforms.

In addition, the Government will invest $40.7 million over four years to provide a catch up program for Prevenar 13, a vaccine to protect against pneumococcal disease, on the National Immunisation Program for eligible children.

“Australians know that national health reform is already delivering better health services, closer to home with a total invested in health of $317 billion since 2007,” Minister Roxon said.

“The 2011-12 Budget continues to ensure health reform will deliver improved care that is appropriate, affordable and readily accessible for all Australians.”