GROWING OUR OWN – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

With increasing numbers of medical graduates emerging from Australian universities, measures that promote rural training and work opportunities to attract graduates to rural practice are critical to the sustained improvement in the distribution of the medical workforce for rural and remote Australia.

Medical student places at Australian universities increased from 8,689 domestic students in 2006¹ to 14,384 in 2014². Recent research indicates there are still challenges in attracting medical students to general practice and then to rural general practice.

The vast majority of the expected 3,149 domestic medical graduates in 2016² will go on to specialise in areas of medicine other than general practice. A 2013 GP workforce report noted that despite the significant growth in medical training “the proportion of doctors who are GPs is falling as doctors choose to specialise in other areas”.³

The Medical Schools Outcome Database (MSOD) longitudinal study of students at Australian medical schools found that only 16% of medical graduates listed general practice as their preferred specialty in 2014.⁴

The same data indicates less than 5% of graduates intend to practise in rural areas (defined as towns with a population less than 25,000).⁵ These numbers suggest that unless Australian graduates can be persuaded differently, the growth in medical student placements alone may not be sufficient to meet current workforce needs.

It is clear that encouraging more Australian medical graduates to practise in regional, rural and remote communities will require multi-faceted coordinated strategies. Quality training pathways to rural practice, flexible and supportive work environments, and targeted financial and non-financial incentives are all part of the mix.

RURAL BACKGROUND EFFECT

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that medical students with a rural background are more likely to practise in rural areas.⁵ This association between a rural background and becoming a rural doctor has been referred to as the rural background effect.⁶

Based on this evidence, the National Rural Health Student Network (NRHSN) provides an ongoing program of high school visits to rural areas where young mentors can promote and discuss the opportunities for a health career in a rural location. In 2014-15 over 250 NRHSN members visited 96 rural high schools where they spoke to more than 3,000 country students. The promotion of health careers to rural high school students has been recommended as an important strategy to attract those with rural backgrounds to consider health careers⁷. (The NRHSN is managed by Rural Health Workforce Australia with financial assistance from the Federal Department of Health).
RURAL EXPOSURE

There is also evidence that providing rural exposure to students from a non-rural background can encourage rural practice. Having a positive rural experience at undergraduate level - whether it is undertaking an internship at one of the Rural Clinical Schools (RSCs) or a one-week placement in the Kimberley living and working with a host community - can increase the intent of an individual to embark on a rural career.

Emerging research suggests that rural placements and exposure can be a stronger predictor of early career choice than rural background. A recent study found that students who had undertaken an extended rural placement were more than three times as likely as those with a rural background to express a first preference for a rural internship.

PROMOTING RURAL PRACTICE

A number of organisations actively promote rural practice to medical students and early career doctors. The Go Rural campaign, run by RHWA in partnership with the state and territory Rural Workforce Agencies, is one example. Go Rural events have been attended by more than 1,200 participants. Evaluations of the Go Rural program demonstrate that key motivators to practise rurally are:

• the variety and complexity of general practice work
• the capacity to combine general practice with a specialty such as obstetrics or surgery.

Supporting these findings, a recent study commissioned by RHWA amongst urban-based Australian medical students and graduates concludes that initiatives to attract doctors to rural practice should:

• emphasise quality, positive rural experiences;
• focus on the professional challenge and advantages of rural practice; and
• offer multiple rural exposures beginning in early undergraduate years, continuing through vocational training.

REFERENCES

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