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Strategies to improve equitable distribution of new doctors essential

Rural Health West supports moves by the Federal Government to review undergraduate medical training places and says future strategies must focus on improving the distribution of doctors in regional and remote areas of Australia.

The Australian Government Departments of Health and Education today announced they will be looking to conduct a stocktake of the current number and location of student medical places in Australia to determine the most effective methods of addressing the shortage of medical practitioners in country areas.

Rural Health West Chief Executive Officer Tim Shackleton said the organisation strongly supports moves to address the maldistribution of doctors.

“As the only organisation dedicated to recruiting general practitioners to rural Western Australia, we’re at the coalface of this issue. The wave of new doctors continue to prefer working in cities and larger metropolitan areas, and it’s an ongoing challenge to attract them to rural communities.

Since 2001, there has been a slight increase in the number of Australian-trained doctors working in rural Western Australia, however we are still very reliant on International Medical Graduates.

“More than 55 per cent of doctors (493 of 897 general practitioners) working in rural Western Australia were trained overseas. These doctors are highly valued and integral to rural communities, however it demonstrates that the additional undergraduate medical training places have not yet translated to a sustained increase of graduates heading to the bush.

“It’s appropriate a review is conducted to ensure ongoing investment and strategies are focused on addressing distribution to ensure all Australians have reasonable access to safe, quality medical care, regardless of location.”

Rural Health West runs a dedicated future workforce strategy designed to attract and support Australian-trained graduates to live and work in rural Western Australia.

“As Assistant Minister Gillespie rightly states, there is strong evidence that exposure to rural life increases the likelihood of a graduate choosing a career in rural medicine.

“Our attraction strategies include offering vocational placements and scholarships to students and junior doctors to give them a taste of rural life and medicine.

“We also run an ambassador program with undergraduates and junior doctors who are planning to pursue rural medicine encouraging them to speak with their fellow students and colleagues about the benefits of country medicine.”

Tim said the demands on rural general practitioners are many and they are expected to be multi-skilled, which means a high number pursue additional training in obstetrics, general surgery and anaesthetics.

“Rural Health West offers mentoring and upskilling programs for medical practitioners who wish to enhance their procedural skills.

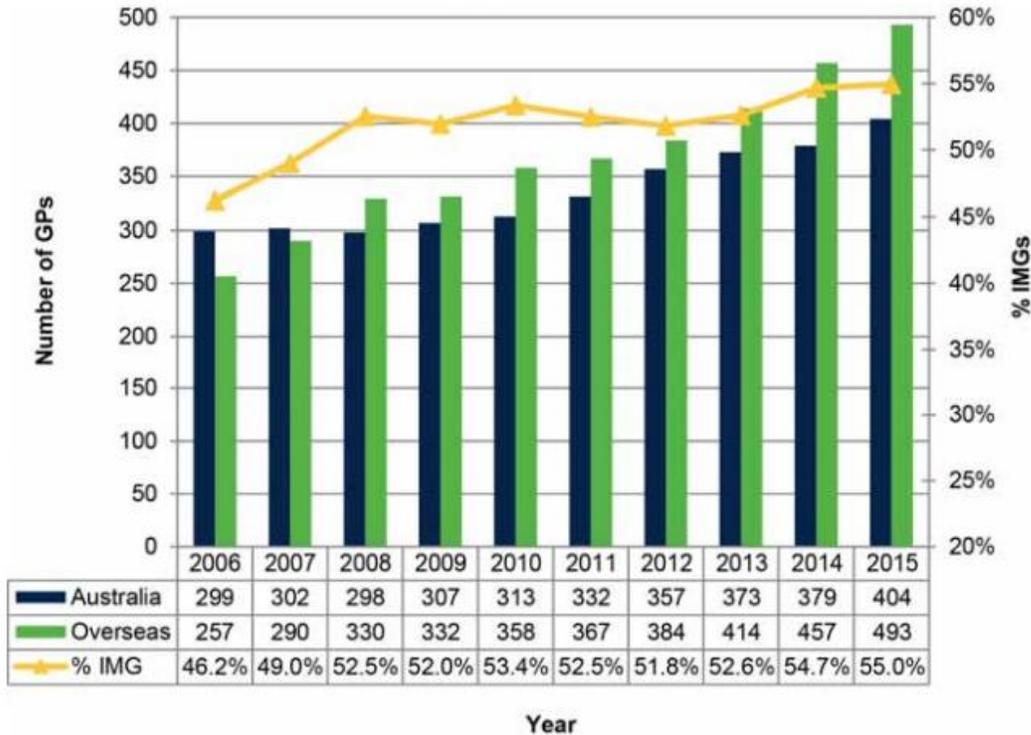
“This is important in ensuring rural communities are able to access safe antenatal care, give birth locally and have minor surgery without having to travel to Perth or another major regional centre.”

Rural Health West also partners with the WA Country Health Service, Western Australian General Practice Education and Training (WAGPET), the Rural Clinical School (WA), the Australian Medical Association (WA), and the Postgraduate Medical Council of Western Australia on the Rural Practice Pathway, which promotes the range of rural medical options and placements available for graduates and junior doctors.

The Rural Practice Pathway maps the range of locations and placements available to undergraduates and postgraduates to gain relevant experience for a career in rural medicine.

ENDS

Figure 16 Number and percentage of IMGs 2006 to 2015



Western Australia continues to be heavily reliant upon overseas trained doctors to fill general practitioner positions throughout rural communities, with this reliance trending upwards over the past ten years.

Further information about the number and distribution of general practitioners is available on request.

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Rural Health West aims to improve access to quality healthcare for rural communities through the provision of a highly skilled, motivated and sustainable medical and allied health workforce. We are a not-for-profit organisation primarily funded through the WA Country Health Service and the Australian Government Department of Health.