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Clinical training at risk if not funded by Healthcare Agreements

Australia faces a healthcare crisis if clinical training places do not increase to match the thousands of future doctors moving through Australia's university system, the peak body representing university medical schools in Australia and New Zealand has warned.

The acting chair of Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand, Professor James Angus, said although attempts to address Australia's doctor shortage had led to increased funding for university medical places there had been no corresponding increase in clinical placements where students could gain hands-on experience.

"By 2012 there will be nearly 60 per cent more medical school graduates than that expected in 2008," Professor Angus said. "However there has not been a commensurate increase in clinical training places. There is very little point in training Australian medical graduates if there is no significant increase in the number of clinical placements to cater for these students and the quality staff to train them. Students can't learn by looking over the shoulders of 10 others."

Clinical teaching in hospitals is normally undertaken by hospital-based staff or university staff who have complementary employment arrangements with teaching hospitals. "To this end, there has been a tacit understanding that public hospitals have an obligation to educate and train doctors," Professor Angus said.

But although a significant proportion of funding for clinical teaching of medical students is provided through state governments in the operating budgets of teaching hospitals it is rarely an explicit budget line, he said.

In a submission to the National Health and Hospital Reform Commission the Medical Deans have recommended that financial support for clinical training places be made explicit in the Australian Healthcare Agreements between the Commonwealth, the states and the territories.

"The Australian Healthcare Agreements are the key instrument for the delivery of Commonwealth funding for health to the states and territories but have not in the past included any explicit requirement or key performance indicators to ensure that clinical training for doctors is supported," Professor Angus said.

"The inclusion of clinical training is really a fundamental requirement if we want to have an adequately trained medical workforce.

"Training of medical students should be seen as core business for health services."

The current Australian Healthcare Agreement expired on 30 June. Negotiations for the next five-year agreement are underway.

For further information please contact Professor James Angus on 03 8344 5894.