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Medical students may never qualify, warn Deans

Hundreds of Australian medical students may be unable to qualify as doctors because of a looming shortage of training places, the country's peak medical university body has warned.

The Medical Deans of Australia and New Zealand said there would not be enough intern places for all graduates within a few years unless governments acted urgently to increase the number of places.

The one-year intern training places, usually in a large metropolitan hospital, are essential for registration as a doctor.

'We need a guarantee of training places for all medical graduates, whether they be Commonwealth funded, fee-paying domestic or international students,' said Medical Deans President, Professor Jim Angus.

'Federal and state government health ministers recently met and only guaranteed places for Commonwealth-funded students, leaving about one-quarter of our medical students without certainty. Young people who embark on a career in medicine need to study for years and who would commit time and money if there is no training – and no job – at the end of it?'

Professor Angus said the number of training places was not keeping pace with the increase in the number of medical students. Australia had 1,335 medical graduates in 2006 (not including international students) and this number is set to jump to 3,108 in 2014.

'Those facing the possibility of missing out on an intern place include full fee-paying Australian students and international students who have completed years of study in Australia,' said Professor Angus.

Local full fee-paying students make up about 6 per cent of Australia's 14,500 medical students and international students make up about 17 per cent. Professor Angus said about 70 per cent of international students at some medical schools indicated they wanted to continue working in Australia after becoming fully qualified.

'There is a shortage of doctors in Australia and we are trying to remedy this situation, with more students in the system,' he said. 'But if we cannot guarantee them access to complete their training, this shortage will simply get worse and worse. There is need for urgent action and a guarantee of intern places for all.'

Professor Angus said last week's health funding announcement by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd provided a welcome opportunity for guaranteed training places, but there was a long way to go before the outcomes of the proposal were known. 'Urgent action is needed now,' he said.

Dean of Bond University's faculty of Health Sciences and Medicine, Professor Richard Hays, said fee-paying Australian students were deeply concerned that they may miss out on training once they qualified, despite assurances from the Queensland Government that there would be adequate intern places for domestic graduates in the state.

More information: Jim Angus (03) 8344 5894