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### **Doctors in demand by poachers**

SINGAPORE and New Zealand are lining up to poach thousands of Australian-trained foreign-born doctors because governments and medical authorities can't guarantee them intern places at the end of their university training, a Sydney conference will hear today.

University of Melbourne health workforce expert Leslyanne Hawthorne said graduates who couldn't get internships were likely to be enticed to Singapore, where the future supply of doctors was jeopardised by a very low birth rate.

Professor Hawthorne said the Singaporean government sent several recruitment delegations to Australia each year. "They do the rounds of all the key universities."

"They will provide the clinical training places and they're very willing to provide citizenship. They would snap them up without question."

Professor Hawthorne said New Zealand was also a likely destination. It "registers 1100 overseas-trained doctors a year, yet more than half have gone by the end of the first year".

Many were "backpacker doctors" on working holidays, she said. The shortage of clinical places was more severe in Australia than in Singapore or New Zealand.

But an explosion in domestic medical training is threatening the availability of clinical training places for foreign students who need to obtain residency. Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand said placements looked "reasonably good" for next year, but it had concerns beyond that.

President Justin Beilby said medical authorities had established new placements in areas such as general practitioners' clinics and community health services. "But long term we're unclear how international students will figure in the workforce.

"If they're trained in Australia they should at least be able to do their intern placements (here).

"These are very well-trained students and a significant number of them want to stay." Australia relies heavily on overseas-trained doctors, who are about a third of the medical workforce and more than 40 per cent in some areas, according to the Australian Medical Association.

Professor Hawthorne said Australia imported 3000-5000 of them each year, but qualification and language constraints meant 53 per cent could not work in the Australian health sector for at least five years.

Locally trained international students, who typically took four to six years to graduate, were generally preferable, she said.

They "had to meet English language standards. Their qualifications are fully recognised. Their average age is 24, and they've self-funded to meet exactly the local training requirements."

Professor Hawthorne's research, based on a six-year study of overseas medical students' career aspirations, will be presented today at a research forum at the University of Technology Sydney.

She said the four main source countries were Malaysia and Singapore followed by Canada and the US. North American students were the most likely to want to remain in Australia.

Article by John Ross

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