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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical student numbers jump

The intake of first-year Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students in Australian universities has reached a new high of 2.5 per cent, matching the percentage of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

The increase, up from 0.8 per cent in 2004, comes as a new is signed today between the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA) and the Medical Deans of Australian and New Zealand (Medical Deans) to further promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical education and help close the gap in health disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

"What makes our work with the Medical Deans important is we have made positive, sustainable and long term change over the life of our previous Collaboration Agreements," said AIDA President Associate Professor Peter O'Mara. "The new agreement will build on this success."

"Importantly, this Collaboration Agreement gives us the continuing capacity to jointly influence broader structural reform and policy and program agendas in health and education," said Medical Deans President Professor Justin Beilby. "From this basis we are better able to work towards recruiting and graduating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students."

While positive progress has occurred in recruiting first-year Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students, the total enrolment rate stands at 1.6 per cent of total domestic medical student enrolments and graduations currently account for approximately 0.5 per cent of total domestic graduations.

"The rise in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students is a great way we can build the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors. It's important to ensure that these students can access appropriate cultural and academic support to graduate," said AIDA Student Director, Ms Dana Slape.

Although total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolment and graduation percentages are expected to increase over the coming years, an important joint priority of AIDA and Medical Deans under their new Collaboration Agreement will be to advocate for reform within medical schools to ensure appropriate support processes are in place to increase the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors. Medical Deans' Leaders in Indigenous Medical Education (LIME) Network will continue to provide significant leadership within the schools to achieve this reform.

"Australia's first Aboriginal doctor graduated in 1983," said AIDA CEO Mr Romlie Mokak. "In 2009, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors comprised approximately 0.2 per cent of the total number of medical practitioners in Australia. To come close to population parity, there would need to be an additional 1,200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors today."

To achieve this requires sustained and accelerated support from governments, education and health sectors to increase the recruitment, retention and completion rates of students, as well as work environments that encourage medical graduates to practice and specialise in their chosen field.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical practitioners currently fulfil a range of leadership roles across policy, service delivery, research and academia, contributing not only to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health outcomes but to positive health reform for all Australians. For example, six Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors were recently announced as members of the new National Health and Medical Research Council's Principal Committees. A priority under the new agreement, AIDA and Medical Deans have committed to develop stronger pathways for Indigenous medical academic leaders.

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