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More indigenous medical students create milestone

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Overcoming hurdles ... fourth-year medical student Dana Slape, a Larrakia woman, mentors other indigenous students at the University of Western Sydney. Photo: Kate Geraghty



THE number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students has increased dramatically in the past decade and now matches the ratio of indigenous to non-indigenous people in Australia for the first time.

Last year, 80 of Australia's 3241 domestic first year medical students were indigenous – 2.5 per cent, up from 0.8 per cent in 2004.

The milestone is being celebrated by medical deans and the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association because 2.5 per cent of Australia's population is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

"This is a huge step forward," said the president of the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association, Peter O'Mara.

However, Associate Professor O'Mara – a Wiradjuri man, GP and Aboriginal health specialist – said the biggest task was getting students through their medical degrees because about 30 per cent of indigenous students had not completed the course in the past compared with about 2 per cent of other students.

Family and cultural commitments, financial difficulties and, in some cases, racism contributed to the high attrition rate, he said.

A new agreement being signed today between the association and the Medical Deans of Australia and New Zealand aimed to monitor and support these students more so they could graduate and become successful doctors, he said.

The agreement comes after a report, published this year by the Medical Deans of Australia and New Zealand, found a huge variation in how well universities were teaching indigenous health and recruiting and retaining indigenous students.

While all universities were teaching some indigenous health, the report said about 66 per cent of indigenous medical students had experienced racism and discrimination from other students, residents, professors or physicians during their course, with 64 per cent feeling inadequately supported.

Associate Professor O'Mara said he hoped the new agreement would help better educate all medical students about indigenous people, including their history and special needs, so they can help close the gap in health outcomes between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

While indigenous people generally felt more comfortable with indigenous doctors, there were only about 160 of them, making up 0.2 per cent of the total medical workforce, he said.

"To get parity, we need another 1200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors," he said.

A fourth year medical student, Dana Slape, a Larrakia woman, said she was thrilled about the recent milestone because it showed universities were getting better at recruiting indigenous students. Having been told during high school that she was unlikely to get into medicine, Ms Slape, 28, said it was important for young indigenous people to see people overcoming hurdles to achieve their goals.

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have just as much ability and right to become doctors as everyone else," said Ms Slape, who mentors younger indigenous students at the University of Western Sydney.

"We're aware that as we grow our numbers of doctors, lawyers and teachers, more kids will be inspired to do the same."

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/more-indigenous-medical-students-create-milestone-20120820-24ipi.html#ixzz2488yKupk>