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### **Staying the course: University attrition rates key to true parity**

“Getting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into studying medicine is one thing but getting the graduations at the other end is the really important thing.”

The percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students starting University may have reached parity with national population percentages – but there is still a long way to go before true parity is achieved.

The intake of first-year Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students into University has reached 2.5 per cent, a figure that matches the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia.

But what percentage of students are graduating and is attaining post-graduate parity good enough?

According to Australian Indigenous Doctors’ Association President Peter O’Mara it is ensuring that students stay the course through to graduation that matters most.

Approximately 30 per cent of students don’t complete the course – compared to just two per cent for non-indigenous students.

Dr O’Mara said while it is good and well to talk about the students going in to University it is far more important to see those students coming out the other side with degrees.

“Although this is good news, it’s not the end of the story,” Dr O’Mara said.

“We have higher attrition rates for our students.

“The reasons are multifaceted, a lot of our students have to be away from home, and they still have strong family and cultural commitments.

“So they have all the pressures that non-indigenous students have -which are quite a bit because medicine is a hard thing to study – but then they have a whole heap of other facets on top of that which makes it really tough.

“Although some Universities are really supporting our students well, some of them aren’t quite doing such a great job.

“That is an important decision for indigenous students to make when their thinking about study and where is going to best suit their needs.”

A new Collaboration Agreement between the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association and the Medical Deans of Australia and New Zealand will be signed today to encourage more indigenous people to take up study and help them through their training years.

Currently there are approximately 160 indigenous doctors across the country, but that figure could double in the next five years should retention rates improve.

“We’ve been working together for some time now,” Dr O’Mara said.

“We collaborate to make pathways more appropriate for entry for students to support them through.

“Clearly it’s not just the responsibility of aboriginal people and aboriginal doctors to make positive inroads or close the gap between the disparities in aboriginal health – it is the responsibility of everyone.

“So part of what we do there is teach the non-indigenous students who are going to come on and become doctors appropriate ways to deal with our mob, to understand the issues that are important for aboriginal people, to engage with our people and to know what a priority this is and the process that needs to unfold.”

Dr O’Mara said highlighting the right support programs was essential to achieving post-graduate parity.

“You could have all the support structures in the world in place, they are not necessarily going to be appropriate for aboriginal students,” Dr O’Mara said.

“So we need to be a bit more creative about how we do that support.

“Getting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into studying medicine is one thing but getting the graduations at the other end is the really important thing.

“If you’re just looking at numbers, we make up 2.5 per cent of the population but of the medical workforce we make up about .3 per cent.

“If you factor in that our people are the sickest people in this country, we need to be higher than parity in the percentages.”

By Daniel Fraser

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ABC

<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2012/08/21/3572504.htm>