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First graduates from new medical school

It was with some pride that the University of Western Sydney celebrated its first group of graduates from its school of medicine, which opened in 2007. Ninety-two students – 86 Bachelors of Medicine and Bachelors of Surgery, two Bachelors of Medical Research and four PhDs – made up the first graduating class in December. The school now has a total 582 students.

“It’s only once in your lifetime that you expect to be at the graduating class of the very first course,” said Professor Annemarie Hennessy, the dean of medicine. The school was established with the aim of attracting students from the 14 local government areas that make up western Sydney, an area with a large population from low socio-economic backgrounds.

“We reached that goal fairly quickly,” said Hennessy. Many students were put off studying medicine elsewhere due to the travel and time constraints of travelling to other universities. “We have got students from that area who are attaining equal academic standards of anywhere else. We quickly identified a group of students who were locals, but who may not have taken up a chance to do medicine in the city, and we’ve been able to provide that for them locally,” she said.

“I know that some of those individuals have ambitions to be specialists of the highest order and I have no doubt they will be of the highest order. These guys are your brain surgeons and heart surgeons of tomorrow.”

The university also has a large indigenous student cohort and won the Leaders in Indigenous Medical Education Award for its efforts to engage with Aboriginal students. Western Sydney is a rapidly growing area, but medical services have failed to keep up with the expanding population. Hennessy hopes that the new school will mean more trained doctors in the region.

“Where people study they’re likely to set up and live,” she said. “[Until now] there hasn’t been any growth in medical graduates around the country and the limitations on the number of graduates, in parallel with the rapid growth [in Western Sydney], has meant the growth has outstripped services in the area.”

The university has clinical schools and training facilities at Bankstown-Lidcombe Hospital, Blacktown/Mt Druitt Hospital, Campbelltown/Camden Hospital, Bathurst Hospital and Lismore Base Hospital. Students also spend 30 per cent of the third year of their degree working in the community at general practices, migrant health services, women’s refuges, child health centres and community aged care services.

Hennessy said the students were enthusiastic about the range of services and the clinical opportunities provided. There had also been positive feedback from the university’s nursing school, with which the medical students worked. “We train the students in 57 different locations and the feedback has been extremely positive, in fact quite joyous, about being able to participate in teaching this first group,” she said.

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