



# THE AGE

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## Young doctors need a dose of funding

**F**OR several years, the medical profession has been sounding the warning bell about shortages of doctors. Not only are more practitioners needed now in provincial cities, rural and remote regions, but the demand for doctors, specialists and nursing staff will escalate as Australia tries to cater for its ageing population.

Yet the prospects of 182 medical students hang in the balance because of a stand-off over funding for medical internships. These training positions traditionally are funded by state governments, which run the public hospital system, but the states claim the hospitals are stretched to capacity and cannot provide the kind of intense training and close supervision needed for all the medical students graduating from Australia's universities.

There is, it seems, a classic industry bottleneck: the number of medical students has

doubled in Australia in the past decade (tripled in Queensland), and that is a good thing. Health Workforce Australia says that by 2025 there will be about 2700 fewer doctors than Australia needs. But the funnel through which medical students must attain accreditation if they are to become practitioners — the state public hospital system — has not expanded to meet the increased flow of graduates.

That reflects a lamentable lack of foresight by successive governments which, yet again, shy away from the kind of big investments needed for the future because they fear voter backlash over anything resembling a near-term fiscal deficit.

The states contend that merely throwing more money at the hospitals will not alleviate the problem; they want the doctor-training system diversified to include private hospital internships, community clinics and rural practice. But *The Age* believes that is a temporary

patch only. A comprehensive, nationally coordinated and appropriately funded approach to all aspects of medical training is needed. It must involve co-operation and goodwill between the Commonwealth and state governments, public hospitals, private hospitals, the colleges representing surgeons and other specialists, and the universities, which happily rake in more than \$250,000 in fees from each foreign student in a medical training course.

The Commonwealth has earmarked \$10 million to fund 100 of the 182 internships still in limbo. How much more is needed? Simple math: at \$100,000 or so for each internship, the balance would be \$8.2 million. Spread around Australia, that amounts to about \$2.5 million from each of the major states. For a pittance, the states are denying several dozen medical graduates the chance to train to be the doctors this country so desperately needs.