



\$8m windfall to boost internship program

MEDICAL Deans says an extra \$8 million of federal funding, announced on the weekend by Health Minister Tanya Plibersek, will help resolve internship shortages and keep doctors in the bush.

But students say the money won't plug the gap in internship places, let alone a looming shortage of specialist training places.

The money is expected to fund about 60 new internship places next year in regional private hospitals. Medical Deans president Peter Smith said 80 per cent of the medical students at the regional campuses of his own institution, the University of NSW, wanted to continue their training in the bush.

"If they can do their internship there, they may go into a general practice training program, or into one of the other specialties where training is established in regional Australia. (But if) they can't get an internship they have to go back to the city."

Professor Smith said the funding would also free up more internships for international students, after last year's overseas graduates were left short of places.

"Despite what you might think, quite a number of international students are very happy to work in regional Australia," he said.

Last year's shortage affected about 180 international graduates who had planned to continue training in Australia. A last-ditch agreement between

the commonwealth and most states and territories salvaged places for about 130 of them, with the commonwealth funding about 90, but up to 50 graduates are thought to have taken overseas internships instead.

Commentators say a re-emergence of the problem could deny Australia vitally needed locally trained doctors — considered preferable to people educated overseas — and jeopardise the reputation of its lucrative medical education exports.

The Australian Medical Students Association praised the federal government for acting earlier this time around. "It helps provide certainty for students graduating this year," acting president Steve Hurwitz said.

"However, 60 may not cover everyone. We are concerned that it's not going to be enough and we're still going to lose medical graduates overseas."

Mr Hurwitz said the internship crisis was the "tip of the iceberg", with clinical places running short for junior doctors in their second, third and fourth years of postgraduate training. Last year, shortages emerged in Queensland and Victoria, with up to 760 doctors struggling to find places after completing their compulsory internships.

"We're going to need to expand the number of specialty training places, including in general practice," Mr Hurwitz said. "The end game is a fully trained doctor."

JOHN ROSS