

The evidence is in – we need to put doctors where we need them, not new medical schools

Medical Deans is very worried about the impact of any proposed new medical school could have on the medical training system.

All governments agreed, in the establishment of Health Workforce Australia, that Australians deserved to have the best evidence available to help us determine how many doctors we need and where we need them.

We now have this evidence

In the past decade a range of initiatives has helped us double the number of medical graduates

The predicted supply of doctors should come close to meeting demand in the next year or so.

The training system now needs to support this expanded pipeline so we get high quality well trained doctors in places where we need them.

A recent Senate inquiry pointed out: "The current pressing issue is not student numbers, but the capacity in the system to adequately train those students all the way along a pathway from student to health professional who will work in rural areas.

We also know that there is still work to do to get doctors in places where patients need them whether that be rural Australia or the western suburbs of Sydney.

Figures for 2010 show that cities have an average of 219.5 specialists per 100,000 people compared with 85.5 for inner-regional areas, 47.6 for outer regions and 59.5 for remote areas. There are serious shortages in demand areas such as obstetrics and gynaecology, pediatrics and psychiatry.

All medical schools are working to achieve this goal.

The majority of the already 18 medical schools in Australia have rural and regional campuses to help train tomorrow's doctors in these settings

For example, medical students at UNSW can undertake a significant part of their training at Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie, Wagga Wagga or Albury and in the near future will be able to complete all six years of medicine in a regional area.

Other schools have focused on outer metropolitan settings where it has been traditionally difficult to recruit and retain doctors

All this has been done with large investments by governments in infrastructure and training

While on first glance a new medical school in a rural or regional setting may seem like a good idea, it ignores the current workforce evidence and the large number of current initiatives aimed at putting doctors where we need them

It also risks wasting large amounts of public money that could be diverted into better support and management of new graduates and doctors we have

Health systems are under increasing pressure and no government can afford to spend its health budget unwisely.

We can't afford to be distracted by a debate over a new medical school that would take a decade to produce its first graduates and would swallow up large chunks of our limited resources - without addressing the real causes of the problem.

“If the number of medical students in Australia is further increased without extra investment in training infrastructure, it won't increase the number of doctors serving our communities - it will just increase the number of unemployed doctors in our communities.”

Contact: Professor Judy Searle, CEO, 02 9114 1680, Professor Peter Smith, President, 02 9385 2451