

Coalition divided over plan for new regional medical school

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A FIGHT over a plan to create a new regional medical school could become a political issue after the Nationals signalled strong support for the proposal from Charles Sturt and La Trobe universities.

The established medical schools believe they have headed off the proposal, with Tony Abbott reportedly assuring the medical deans that, like Labor's Health Minister Tanya Plibersek, he has no plans to back the idea.

But the Liberals' Coalition partners, the Nationals, are backing the plan as a way to solve the chronic shortage of doctors in regional areas after strong growth in graduate numbers resulted only in more city-based doctors.

Coalition health spokesman Peter Dutton was non-committal, his office saying the opposition's health policy would be announced closer to the election. But Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand president Peter Smith told the HES that one of his members had been told that the Opposition Leader was not interested in approving a new school. Mr Abbott's office did not respond in time to queries from the HES.

"The model (proposed by CSU and La Trobe) is based on national and international evidence that supports rural training and is cost-effective by combining existing infrastructure and resources. In my view it deserves the government's strong consideration," Nationals senator and opposition regional education spokeswoman Fiona Nash said in a statement.

The Australian Medical Association opposes any new schools, given the near-term oversupply of graduates and shortage of internships.

Training spokesman Will Milford said he could yet have an open mind if a new school did not result in a net expansion of domestic places, but that would mean taking places away from existing schools and lead to them making up the shortfall by recruiting more international students.

Last week, Ms Plibersek said the government first wanted to ensure there was sufficient training capacity for internships before considering a new school.

La Trobe and Charles Sturt are arguing that a medical school located in the Murray-Darling area would effectively retain graduates in regional areas.

Many students have to travel to cities to do their initial study and proponents of the new school argue that they too often end up staying there.

Professor Smith said the problem was not at the undergraduate level, adding that the lack of internship places and specialist training opportunities in regional areas was driving doctors to the cities.

Last month, an independent review of health workforce programs by former NSW director general of human services Jennifer Mason said regional training pathways for doctors needed to be boosted urgently.

But she was agnostic on the merits of a new regional school, noting that while there were merits in keeping students in regional areas, the shortage of training places following the expansion of existing schools appeared a major issue.

"Further time and evaluation is needed to determine the true strength of arguments from both sides," the review said.

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