

Medical schools ready to boost hospital capacity with new Medical Assistant roles

(Sydney – Friday, 1 May, 2020) A new role which allows final year medical students to work inside hospitals has been designed to enable Australia’s healthcare capacity to be immediately increased if required in response to COVID-19.

Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand (MDANZ) has welcomed today’s joint announcement by Health Minister, Greg Hunt, and Education Minister, Dan Tehan, on the importance of clinical training and the recognition that medical schools, students and government health systems are poised to support any future workforce demand.

If needed, choice will be given to many of the 3,600 final year medical students to take on new paid roles during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on each health service’s requirements.

Across the country, the States and Territories have been working closely with medical schools to plan and prepare for the potential surge in patient care, and to enable senior students to continue their path to becoming Australia’s future new doctors.

At the same time, medical students will maintain their vital experiential learning. Medical schools have worked swiftly to calibrate learning for all students to ensure an uninterrupted education experience.

These new roles will help maintain essential non-COVID-19 related care and take pressure off medical and nursing staff in the routine aspects of care that will continue in hospital wards, outpatient clinics, operating theatres, birthing suites and community settings.

The new medical assistants will be part of multi-disciplinary healthcare teams, providing medical care and support consistent with the clinical competency and experience of the appointee. Medical assistants can work for 3-6 months supervised by senior doctors, with time out to continue their course work and clinical learning.

President of Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand and Dean of Medicine and Dentistry at James Cook University, Professor Richard Murray, said there will still be appropriate allocation of tasks, stringent medical oversight and time each week dedicated to continued course work and learning.

“Should senior health workers be diverted to deal with COVID19 requirements, final year medical students would be ready to assist doctors with preparing and supporting case work in areas such as maternity, general practice and other wards,” Prof Murray said.

Other positions developed include triage assistants, telemedicine assistants, support for Junior Medical Officers, roles in specific response units, and GP clinic supports. Regular and

widespread consultation with students has been held every step of the way to ensure their input and involvement.

“Medical students have always completed immersive placements in healthcare facilities. As well as making a valuable contribution to patient care as part of the wider healthcare team, this clinical training enables them to gain the experience and skills we need of our future doctors,” added Prof Murray.

“We appreciate the recognition from government and the health services that with no students we have no future.”

Chief Medical Officer, Professor Brendan Murphy, welcomed the collaboration and its focus.

“Australia needs our final year medical students to graduate at the end of 2020 and be ready to work as qualified interns in our medical facilities,” Prof Murphy said.

“In light of the challenges and changing situations that health services and medical schools across the country are facing, we cannot overstate the importance of working together to put patient care first and also support the vital need to continue the clinical training of our students.”

Dean of Medicine at Western Sydney University, Annemarie Hennessy, has been closely involved in designing the NSW approach.

“Final year medical students are bright, enthusiastic and already very knowledgeable. We are enabling them to take useful and appropriate roles in the healthcare system earlier, while still providing the supervised and structured learning they need to progress,” said Prof Hennessy.

“The incredible cooperation between the medical schools, government health services, hospital leaders, students and medical boards has enabled this new role to be designed in just six weeks. Our students are now well-informed and well-prepared to step in should they be needed.”

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