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Supporting medical students with a disability

The 22 medical schools across Australia and New Zealand are stepping up their work to make sure that students with a disability are given the support and reasonable adjustments needed to help them demonstrate and realise their potential, following new guidance for its members released today by their peak body, Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand (Medical Deans).

The core business of medical schools is to identify, teach, and support those students who have the ability and motivation to become the highly competent and socially accountable doctors that our communities need. Yet, it is recognised that there have been very capable students who have been disadvantaged because they have a disability.

The new guidance document, which updates the 2017 document, was developed by a working group of the medical schools, with representatives from student bodies, regulators, and disability advocates, under the leadership of Professor Peter Crampton, previous Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the Division of Health Sciences at the University of Otago and former Dean of the Otago Medical School.

“For those students with a disability who are looking to pursue a career as a doctor and have the capabilities and attributes needed, there are many ways they can be supported to enter and progress through a medical program” said Professor Crampton. “When this support isn’t provided, not only are they losing a fulfilling career but the community is losing a potentially excellent doctor”.

The guidance document provides advice, useful resources, and a suggested framework for medical schools to consider in their approach to building greater inclusivity within their culture, systems, and environment. It proposes practical suggestions for medical schools to consider, including:

- promoting inclusiveness, within the university and externally;
- encouraging early engagement and discussion with the applicant or current student about the medical program and possible reasonable adjustments;
- facilitating open, constructive, and ongoing discussions between the medical school and the student;
- leveraging available supports and services both within and external to the university;
- exploring and implementing reasonable adjustments that can be made by both the university and the student; and
- connecting students with peers and student support networks.

“For many students, their disability isn’t obvious or visible to others. For some, this can make it even harder to reach out and have that conversation about the supports and help that could be available. But we don’t want our students to be struggling. This is why it is essential to promote an inclusive culture so students feel comfortable and confident to come forward and seek reasonable adjustments when they need them” said Professor Crampton. “We recognise that adjustments won’t always be possible or make a difference, but if they are feasible and likely to be effective, then we should and we will make them.”

Central to the guidance provided in the document is the need for early, open, and constructive discussions between the applicant or student and the medical school on possible supports or reasonable adjustments, bringing in additional expertise or connections where relevant.

Professor Richard Murray, President of Medical Deans, noted that this document reflects substantial work undertaken across the medical schools looking at their systems and approaches and consulting extensively with medical training and health service providers, receiving close to 40 in-depth responses from external stakeholders.

“Medical schools are invested in finding, training, and supporting those who will make the best future doctors, so that our health system can continue to provide excellent care to patients. This guidance will go a long way to helping us identify and remove those unnecessary barriers that impact students with a disability. We will all benefit from having a more inclusive medical education system and health workforce” said Professor Murray.

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Further information

“**Inclusive Medical Education: guidance on medical program applicants and students with a disability**” can be accessed at the Medical Deans’ website at

<https://medicaldeans.org.au/md/2021/04/Inclusive-Medical-Education-Guidance-on-medical-program-applicants-and-students-with-a-disability-Apr-2021-1.pdf>

The guidance document was developed by a working group with wide representation from Australian and New Zealand medical schools and a range of key stakeholders including the Medical Board of Australia, Australian Medical Council, Medical Council of New Zealand, Australian Medical Students Association, Doctors with Disabilities Australia, with policy and research support from Medical Deans. Medical Deans would like to thank all those who contributed to the discussions and development of this guidance document.

Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand Inc. (Medical Deans) is the peak body representing professional entry-level medical education, training and research in Australia and New Zealand. The organisation’s membership comprises the Deans of Australia’s 21 medical schools and the two New Zealand schools.

As well as having an extensive representative and advocacy role in the advancement of health and education, Medical Deans auspice and manage a number of projects in relation to medical education and the medical workforce, including the Medical Schools Outcomes Database, Indigenous health and the LIME Network, graduate competencies and assessment, clinical supervision, student health and wellbeing, research, and social accountability.

<https://medicaldeans.org.au/>