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THE NEED FOR FLEXIBLE AND IMAGINATIVE TRAINING

In recent months, there has been an apparent sudden revelation in government that postgraduate training places are in short supply. As a result, for the first time ever, our international students have not been guaranteed intern places in NSW.

For students, the consequences of this decision are extremely difficult, leaving them scrambling to consider other options at the same time as preparing for exams. It also reflects poorly on a country which supposedly welcomes international students.

But is the premise on which it has been taken even correct?

Work being undertaken in our Medical School suggests not. Our investigations suggest training places are abundant if those who designate them think laterally about where medicine is practised.

Traditionally, postgraduate training has taken place in our public hospital system. We have all trodden the path of intern, resident and registrar through a public system where we have been trained by senior colleagues who have seen their roles as both a responsibility and an honour. Changes in the way medicine is practised, the growth of the private hospital sector and the shift of people from hospitals into the ambulatory care setting, necessitate a major rethink in the way we continue to provide high quality postgraduate training.

Several myths need to be dispelled. The first is that private hospitals and private patients do not want to be involved in postgraduate training. The Epworth Hospitals in Melbourne have already established themselves as leading academic, teaching institutions and many of our private hospitals in Sydney have embraced the opportunity to participate in teaching. Professor John Horvath and Ms Jackie Ross have been helping to increase opportunities in these hospitals both

for medical students and postgraduate trainees. These are hardly negotiations but positive discussions with immediate positive outcomes. The Royal Colleges recognise the need to change quickly and to accredit these training positions.

The second myth is that training that is not undertaken in a hospital is in some way inferior. The reality is that a huge amount of medicine in Australia is now practised in general practices, specialists rooms and health centres. That is where our graduates will spend most of their practising lives. That is an environment for which we need to prepare them. The challenge in this sector is to provide the facilities to enable a decent learning environment. Patients generally love meeting younger trainees and are quite happy provided they are being properly supervised by a more senior colleague.

The third myth is that training that is not supervised by an Australian within our country could not possibly meet our standards. This presupposes that our trainees are not able to separate good from bad, and that health systems in other parts of the world are all inferior to our own. That type of arrogance will be our downfall. International education which offers new perspectives, comparative experiences and new cultural experiences will produce more enlightened practical doctors ready to meet the health needs of our community.

Sydney Medical School is forging new partnerships locally and internationally which will provide better educational opportunities for our students. There is a real urgency to this endeavour as new medical school graduates emerge. We need to cut through the bureaucratic forest and have the training of our graduates occur in settings which will make them ready and relevant to contemporary medical practice.