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Training for NT General Practitioners facing a grim future

The national trend for declining enrolments in GP training is most profound in the Northern Territory (NT) and could spell disaster for NT's future GP workforce according to a study by a leading medical research institute.

Historically, the NT has struggled to attract and retain GPs, especially in remote areas, and relies heavily on doctors enrolled in GP training, however between 2016 and 2020 new enrolments in GP training in the NT fell by 50 percent, a stark comparison to the 12 percent national decline.

Led by Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) Professor of Remote and Rural Health Services Research John Wakerman, the study looked to determine the factors underpinning the decline in GP enrolments in the NT and how to overcome these issues.

According to Dr Deb Russell, a Menzies Senior Research Fellow, the period prior to doctors enrolling in specialty training was deemed the most crucial for attracting them to GP training in NT.

"As a research institute at the forefront of looking into current health issues and how they impact on rural and especially remote populations, we welcomed the opportunity to proactively work to reduce the alarming trend of GP training decline in the NT, while at the same time recognizing that this is a complex problem and there is no easy solution" Dr Russell said.

"We found that the most important phase of training to invest in was the period of time from when medical students graduated to when they first enrolled in a specialty training program. Many are still making up their minds about their career path at this time."

"The two most important actions targeting these junior doctors are to provide additional training opportunities outside of hospitals, in primary care, and to select junior doctors for (popular) intern and other hospital training positions who are interested in rural generalism, for example general practice with special interest in Aboriginal health or remote medicine, and in staying in the NT longer term."

"There are several other important things that our stakeholder engagement revealed should be prioritised. Arguably foremost amongst these is to make sure that the employment benefits such as those associated with working for hospitals are available to junior doctors during their GP training."

"Solving the problem in the NT will need a coordinated response from multiple agencies – including the Australian and NT government Departments of Health, GP Colleges, Regional Training Organisations such as NTGPE, and primary care services."

NTGPE Chief Executive Officer Stephen Pincus said NTGPE is well aware of the challenges identified in the Menzies report, with the organisation having provided a comprehensive GP training program in the NT for more than 20 years.

“At NTGPE, we believe that a successful program that will support GP registrars during their training in the NT, and provide opportunities for remote work, needs to include a comprehensive cultural education component, as well as personalised support to overcome barriers to remote work,” he said.

“We are concerned about the new approach to GP training currently being developed by the Commonwealth Government, which will see training and education split between various bodies and likely further impact GP training in the NT, particularly in remote communities.

“While the Menzies report found a positive impact of the John Flynn Placement Program - which brought medical students from interstate to remote communities in the NT - on junior doctors coming to the NT and training as GPs, the Commonwealth Government has since decided to cancel the program.”

The study was funded by the NT Primary Health Network/Rural Workforce Agency NT

The full paper, *Northern Territory General Practice Training Pathway Analysis* is available on request.

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Menzies School of Health Research

Menzies School of Health Research is one of Australia’s leading medical research institutes dedicated to improving Indigenous, global and tropical health. Menzies has a history of over 35 years of scientific discovery and public health achievement. Menzies works at the frontline, joining with partners across the Asia-Pacific as well as Indigenous communities across northern and central Australia. Menzies collaborates to create new knowledge, grow local skills and find enduring solutions to problems that matter.

Northern Territory General Practice Education

NTGPE is the sole General Practice training organisation in the NT and supports registrars, supervisors, and training posts across the NT with a high-quality education and training program that addresses the specific needs of NT communities and residents. GP registrars who train with NTGPE are given outstanding opportunities to become excellent GPs, which is reflected in consistently higher than average exam scores for both Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) and Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM) GP registrars.