

Media Release

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New University-driven Institute tackles Australian health workforce crisis

Experts at two leading Australian universities warn of a looming crisis in patient care in Australia if action is not taken to address health workforce sustainability.

The University of Melbourne and the University of Queensland today launched the Australian Health Workforce Institute (AHWI) to address Australia's drastic shortage of health workers.

"Australia needs to engage in comprehensive and honest debate about health workforce issues. This Institute will promote health workforce research and work closely with Commonwealth and State jurisdictions to ensure a sustainable health workforce in Australia," said Interim Director of AHWI and Executive Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences, at the University of Queensland, Professor Peter Brooks.

"Our aim is to deliver Australia health workforce sustainability by 2020," he said.

"Hospitals and the acute care sector currently consume over 90% of the health budget with less than 10% going to health promotion and disease prevention. We need to 'turn off the tap' and be more proactive about health education and disease prevention. A ratio of 80:20 for health expenditure would be a much more sustainable approach in the long term."

"The goal of health and medical faculties is to contribute to a strong health workforce and to the training of that workforce. It is therefore fitting that world leading health faculties within the Universities of Melbourne and Queensland are behind this initiative," said Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, Professor James Angus.

Nearly 10% of GDP is currently spent on health and as a result of the combined pressures of the ageing population, increasing costs and the burden of chronic diseases, such as diabetes, it is expected to rise to 20% by the year 2025.

The Australian situation reflects an international trend. A recent World Health Organization report predicts a shortfall of 4.25 million health workers to maintain existing services over the next decade. With the increasing demand expected to double health spending in the US to \$4.1 trillion by 2016.

Professor Brooks says Australian policy makers need to adopt innovative educational models and smarter funding arrangements that will deliver health workforce sustainability long term.

The goals of the Institute are;

- Ensuring availability and maintenance of health workforce data and statistics
- Mapping of future health systems
- Development of innovative and flexible education models for future health workforce and
- Development and implementation of health workforce policy.

The Institute website - also launched today (www.ahwi.edu.au) - will include a database of health workforce expertise and a forum featuring cutting-edge articles on health workforce issues.

According to the Centre for Policy Development report, July 2007 one-third of Australian doctors are trained overseas. It recommends that as this is an emerging global health workforce crisis, Australia cannot expect to rely on other countries for a never ending stream of health workers.

Issues that need addressing in Australian health workforce include;

- Immediate shortage in nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists and dentists
- The inequity of distribution of health workers between metropolitan, rural and remote areas
- Health needs of aging population
- A lack of comprehensive, accurate and timely database of health workforce on which to base projections
- Lack of data on available clinical training capacity
- Opportunities for information technology to enable accurate and efficient care particularly in rural and remote communities

“The establishment of AHWI will assist in addressing these critical issues and contribute to a national and international strategy for a sustainable health workforce for the future,” Professor Brooks said.

The University of Queensland Vice-Chancellor, Professor John Hay, said the Institute represented an important collaboration that could provide improved healthcare for all Australians.

“In the past, policy-making in the area of health workforce has tended to respond to the demands of the moment, rather than looking at ways that things could be done more efficiently,” he said.

“The establishment of AHWI, by recognised leaders in health education, will ensure that crucial future health policy decisions are informed by evidence and insight.”

Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, Professor Glyn Davis, says the health sector cannot be quarantined from the general skills shortage in Australia.

“Skills shortages are a top-of-agenda national issue so the Australian Health Workforce Institute will have the opportunity to play a key role in providing vital advice to government and universities on our health workforce needs.”

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