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Patient care at risk under national plan to fast track overseas medical doctors

The quality of patient care in Australian hospitals is at risk under a proposal by federal medical regulators to “fast track” overseas-trained doctors by the end of the year without rigorous clinical oversight, a leading specialist medical college has warned.

Professor David Story, President of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) has called for an immediate pause to the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra)-led strategy because of concerns about the implementation timeline and until more information is provided about the process.

“We welcome the opportunity to work with the federal government and state and territory governments in addressing the well-acknowledged medical workforce challenges we face in Australia, notably in rural and regional areas,” Professor Story said.

“Internationally qualified health practitioners play a vital role in our health system and are needed to supplement and fill critical vacancies in the short term.

“However, any moves to fast track overseas trained medical specialists, including anaesthetists, must not be at the expense of Australia’s strong record of patient safety and quality care.”

Professor Story said a short-term strategy of using international medical graduates “must not undermine a longer-term strategy of having adequate numbers of Australian trained doctors.”

He said the Ahpra proposal is to fast-track specialists from the UK and Ireland, including anaesthetists, without essential rigorous oversight of clinical competence and practice.

Professor Story says the current system of recognition for overseas-trained medical specialists – also referred to as specialist international medical graduates (SIMGs) – with supervision and oversight by medical colleges ensured the high-level clinical standards expected in Australian hospitals. The medical colleges train Australian doctors to very high standards for Australian conditions. These same standards should be expected of overseas doctors working here.

“As a specialist medical college, ANZCA has rigorous processes to ensure that SIMGs have the high-level skills and training specific to practice safely and are capable of independent medical practice in Australia and we already meet the required timeframes in assessing SIMGs set by the regulators,” he explains.

ANZCA, a member of the Council of Presidents of Medical Colleges (CPMC), has joined the CPMC in writing to every state and territory health minister and to Federal Health Minister Mark Butler to highlight the concerns of specialist doctors in Australia.

Key concerns include:

- Lack of targeted placements for areas of greatest need.
- Potential exacerbation of existing workforce imbalances.

- Insufficient long-term retention strategies for underserved areas.
- Need for better balance with domestic training initiatives.
- Inadequate consideration of specialty-specific challenges.

Professor Story is Chair of Anaesthesia and head of the Department of Critical Care at the University of Melbourne and a practising anaesthetist in Melbourne.

“While the new process may sound like a good solution, it is essential for ANZCA and other medical colleges to be involved so that Australians are treated safely, particularly in regional areas where there is traditionally a shortage of doctors,” he says. Further, those doctors need to be adequately supported and mentored for their own wellbeing.

“Under the rigorous education and training oversight embedded into specialist medical colleges training over decades we are able to individually assess the clinical competence of specialists. Without this we fear the quality of patient care may be compromised.”

Ahpra is leading the implementation of one of the recommendations in the “Independent review of Australia’s regulatory settings relating to overseas health practitioners” (the Kruk report”) and has identified anaesthetists, GPs, obstetricians and gynaecologists and psychiatrists as the priority group of overseas-trained specialists who would be recognised for their overseas qualifications and granted medical registration.

Under the proposal, a specialist with an eligible overseas qualification who works in a comparable healthcare system would not need to apply to a specialist college for an assessment. They would apply directly to the board for registration.

The specialist would then work under supervision for six months while completing requirements including cultural safety, and an orientation to the Australian healthcare system.

Professor Story says the “fast track registration pathway” proposed by the Medical Board was aimed at having anaesthetists and the other priority specialties assessed under the new program by December 2024.

“ANZCA is working with the Medical Board of Australia and Ahpra to identify comparable overseas qualifications for overseas trained anaesthetists who want to live and work in Australia. The federal government has indicated it is planning to stick with their December 2024 timeline but such a significant change such as this cannot be rushed.”

ANZCA strongly believes that the safest, most efficient, and cost-effective approach to approving and supporting international anaesthetists to practice in Australia will be through partnership between ANZCA and Ahpra.

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