

POLICY DOCUMENT

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENT RETENTION AND SUPPORT

Background

It is the position of AMSA that the health of all Australians should be a top priority of the government and other relevant organisations. AMSA believes the long-standing inequity in health status between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and non-Indigenous Australians is unacceptable and that it is the responsibility of the future health workforce and their educators to ensure they are prepared to tackle this. AMSA believes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health is a matter for all healthcare providers, not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. AMSA supports all efforts to develop long-term and sustainable initiatives to produce equitable health outcomes for all Australians.

AMSA affirms that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are highly diverse in culture and beliefs, and that practices of engagement must be tailored to individual communities.

AMSA recognises that there is a chronic under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians within the healthcare system and particularly in medicine(1).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors play an essential role within the healthcare system(2).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients are more likely to engage with a healthcare provider and system which employs Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors may become positive role models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors advocate often strongly for the health and rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors may teach non-Indigenous students and health professionals about their own perspective and insight from working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

However, there is often an excessive burden placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students to perform all of the roles above as well as being involved in research. Hence, there is the need for strong support and collegiality in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical community.

AMSA is committed to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations as well as universities and key stakeholders to ensure there is a real and sustainable increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors, and ultimately an improvement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association's (AIDA) document, *Healthy Futures*(3), provides a best-practice standard for the recruitment and retention of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce. AMSA supports this document.

Position Statement

AMSA believes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors play an important role in improving the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and it is essential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students to receive the financial, academic, social and collegiate support they require to complete their medical studies and further their careers.

Policy

AMSA believes that:

1. universities must first and foremost engage with communities prior to students enrolling in medicine, and continue this relationship throughout the medical degree.
2. universities should develop formal retention and support strategies.
3. medical schools should work with key stakeholders to recognise those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who are in financial need and offer fully funded bursaries or assistance with HECS-HELP debt, regardless of admissions entry pathway. There should be no associated obligations.
4. medical schools should work with key stakeholders to provide grants for equipment such as books and clinical skills tools required for studies if students are in need.
5. medical schools should fund and assist their Indigenous health units to provide collegiate support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This may be through linking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within the medical school with academics and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors and the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA).
6. universities should provide safe spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to seek support and information.
7. universities should engage with communities to provide resources and information about what students do at university, what supports are available at university and how the community can support their students.
8. universities must adequately recognise and support the work done by Indigenous Health Units. These units are a strong factor in the recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to that university.
9. universities may need to recognise variation in learning styles associated with culture, and provide resources to Indigenous Health Units to assist in the transition to university-style teaching.
10. medical schools should recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are often looked to as experts in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues which may be inappropriate or stressful for the individual.
 - a. Medical schools should provide educational resources such that non-Indigenous students do not need to overly rely on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students for information.
11. medical schools should provide mechanisms and resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to seek out mentors. Ideally this is through local networks between the Indigenous Health Units and local communities.
12. medical schools should, as much as possible and where appropriate, provide educational opportunities including clinical placements within a student's own community.
13. medical schools should record, evaluate and report their achievements with regards to the implementation of support strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

References

1. D Trewin, R Madden. The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003.
2. Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce National Strategic Framework. Canberra: AHMAC, 2002
3. Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association, Healthy Futures, Published by Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association, 2005

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