

What's up with docs?

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Fewer going into general practice

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AUSTRALIA has more doctors than ever, but fewer are becoming GPs, leading to shortages, especially in regional areas.

An Australian Population Research Institute study says foreign doctors on special visas are being used to fill gaps, but many of them move to metro areas when they can legally do so.

The report by institute associate Mike Moynihan, a retired rural GP, found the number of working doctors in Australia had increased by 46 per cent since 1996.

“However, the increase has primarily gone into the hospital workforce, and into private, non-GP, specialist practice,” it said.

The number of full-time hospital doctors per 1000 of Australia's population has risen by 145 per cent from 1996 to 2020, and the number of non-GP specialists has gone up by 51 per cent, an analysis of federal data shows.

However, the number of

full-time GPs per 1000 people fell by 6 per cent in the same period.

Dr Moynihan said the hospital doctor workforce had risen from 28 per cent to 45 per cent of all working doctors, while the GP workforce had shrunk from a half of all working doctors to a third.

“These trends have resulted in a shortage of GPs, especially in regional areas,” he said.

Werribee GP Joe Garra, an independent candidate for Point Cook at the state election, confirmed the decline of GPs, saying they were paid half of what specialists earned.

Dr Garra said his practice had offered GP training for more than 20 years, but there had been no young doctors attending in the past four years.

“Some of them find it stressful being a GP, too many things to think about, you've got to know a bit about everything,”

he said. “They (GPs) can pretty much choose where to work now, so they're not coming out to the western suburbs at all, or rural areas. It's a big, complicated problem.”

Dr Moynihan's report said the GP shortage had been partly covered by high levels of overseas doctor recruitment.

“However, these overseas-trained doctors mostly move to metropolitan areas when they can legally do so,” he said.

“This pattern is leaving a chronic dependence on more overseas recruitment for regional areas as well as increasing reliance of overseas-trained GPs in metropolitan areas.”

The report said that such dependence on overseas recruitment meant it was not possible to create the flexible and responsive workforce the population needed.

It called for substantial reorganisation of healthcare provision to redress the imbalance of hospital and specialist doctors, and efforts to narrow the pay gap between specialists and GPs.

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