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AMA WELCOMES MORE FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO BONDED MEDICAL PLACEMENTS

The AMA has welcomed the Federal Health Minister’s decision to take a more flexible approach to the obligations on doctors working in bonded placements.

Following representations from the AMA, Health Minister Sussan Ley has advised that the Health Department will be more accommodating in applying return of service obligations on medical graduates enrolled in the Bonded Medical Places (BMP) program and the Medical Rural Bonded Scholarship Scheme (MRBS).

AMA President Dr Michael Gannon the policy shift was an important win for common sense.

“The Department was previously bound by rigid guidelines to applying these return of service obligations had often lead to outcomes that made little sense,” Dr Gannon said.

“Doctors who clearly were committed to their rural patients and more than meeting their obligations found that they were being essentially blocked from undertaking extra training or keeping up their clinical skills, simply because they would have to go to a city for a brief period to do so.

“The Minister is to be commended for acting to address the problem and help ensure rural patients have access to the best possible care.”

Under the original terms of the BMP program, doctors were required to complete a period of eligible service in a rural area or district of workforce shortage equivalent to the length of their medical degree. MRBS graduates were required to complete at least six years eligible service in a rural area.

Former AMA President, Professor Brian Owler, wrote to the Government last year highlighting that the rigid application of return of service obligations was having an unfair impact on participants who were trying to meet these obligations, particularly when they needed to undertake up-skilling and further training in a metropolitan area.

The AMA Council of Rural Doctors has previously identified the importance of rural doctors being able to access opportunities to up-skill in metropolitan centres from time to time.

The Council said such opportunities were vital to support sustainable, high quality, medical care and enable practitioners to share skills and knowledge with their rural colleagues, including doctors in training.

Dr Gannon said return of service arrangements were never intended to be an impediment to this, and the new, more flexible approach taken to their application was an important piece in the puzzle for supporting high quality rural health services.

Under the new policy approach, Health Department officials will have greater scope to approve requests by participants to undertake work in a broader range of areas, provided they are otherwise meeting their return of service obligations.

Dr Gannon urged a sensible approach to the more flexible arrangement.

“It is important that the Department of Health takes a practical approach when it applies the new policy so that it supports doctors who are committed to working in areas of workforce shortage,” he said.

“By taking steps that support a good working experience, this will encourage them to commit to long term practice in these areas - for the benefit of local communities.”

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