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FAMILY TRAGEDY INSPIRES MEDICAL CAREER

AMA INDIGENOUS MEDICAL SCHOLARSHIP AMA NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2017 #amanatcon

As a 13-year-old, James Chapman watched his father, a proud Indigenous man from Yuwlaaraay country, die after a short, seven-week battle with acute myeloid leukaemia. As a school leaver, he became his mother’s carer for 12 months as she recovered from brain surgery.

Today, the 25-year-old, second-year medical student has won the 2017 AMA Indigenous Medical Scholarship –\$10,000 a year for each year of study - to help him pursue his dream of becoming a medical professional.

AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, who presented the Scholarship at the AMA National Conference 2017 in Melbourne today, said that Mr Chapman’s story is inspiring.

“We know that the medical workforce must reflect the diversity of its patients, and that Indigenous people have improved health outcomes when they are treated by Indigenous doctors and health professionals,” Dr Gannon said.

“Yet in 2017, there are just 281 medical practitioners employed in Australia as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander – representing 0.3 per cent of the workforce.

“This is an improvement. It means that there are 60 more Indigenous doctors practising in Australia than in 2012, which shows how critical medical students like Mr Chapman are to building the Indigenous health workforce.”

Mr Chapman said that while he did not realise it at the time, his father was a victim of the gap that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

“After my father’s death, I travelled to Yuwlaaraay country (north-west NSW and south-west Queensland) with my grandfather to return my father,” Mr Chapman said.

“While on this journey, I learnt a lot about our culture, as well as witnessing rural communities with high Indigenous populations that were clearly suffering from health inequities.

“Coming from a regional city with access to most health specialist facilities within a 10km radius, I was shocked to see communities with access only to a visiting doctor and nurse.”

While doing his HSC, he studied biology and became intrigued by the way the human body worked. He dreamed of one day becoming a doctor, but was discouraged by his teachers.

After school, he began an Arts degree, majoring in Indigenous Studies, at the University of Wollongong. But his study was derailed when his mother was diagnosed with a brain tumour, and he became her carer for a year while she recovered.

“Constantly in clinical environments, my dream of becoming a medical professional became more intense, and after my mother recovered, I began a Science degree with the intention of completing post graduate medicine,” Mr Chapman said.

“Then I discovered an entry program for medicine at the University of New South Wales for Indigenous students.”

Now in his second year, Mr Chapman intends to study from Wagga Wagga from his third year onwards to experience rural health, and rural and remote Indigenous health care. He hopes to become a GP, working with Indigenous women and children in rural and remote Australia.

“I learnt a lot from my father, like the importance of family, culture, and education,” Mr Chapman said.

“His death made me realise my potential to contribute to my fellow Indigenous populations via providing access to health services.

“My purpose in studying medicine is so that I can practise in rural and remote Australia, offering Indigenous people access to equal health care, and addressing a major socio-economic inequality in Australia.

“While I realise that closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people isn’t a one-man job, I take comfort in knowing that I can contribute and make a difference to my fellow Indigenous people’s lives; prolonging and preserving a culture that holds a very important place, both to myself and to many others.”

Dr Gannon said that, in 2017, a total of 286 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students are enrolled across all year levels across Australia. However, four of the 15 colleges are yet to have an Indigenous trainee.

“The AMA Scholarship has assisted many Indigenous men and women, who may not have otherwise had the financial resources to study medicine, to graduate to work in Indigenous and mainstream health services,” Dr Gannon said.

“These wonderful doctors are now the pride of the medical profession and their communities, and role models for Indigenous Australians.”

The AMA Indigenous Medical Scholarship was established in 1994 with a contribution from the Commonwealth Government. The AMA is looking for further sponsorships to continue this important contribution to Indigenous health.

Donations are tax-deductible. For more information, go to <https://ama.com.au/advocacy/indigenous-peoples-medical-scholarship>

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