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27 JUN 2005

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Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing

Submission No. *37*
Date Received *28/6/05*

The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission to the Inquiry into skills recognition and associated issues of licensing and registration

In a letter to the Minister for Health and Ageing, the Hon Tony Abbott MP dated 11 May 2005, the Hon Don Randall MP invited submissions to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's Inquiry into skills recognition, upgrading and licensing. I wish to provide a submission in relation to that request.

1. Current arrangements for overseas skills recognition and associated issues of licensing and registration.

Health professionals are not regulated at a national level. Individual states and territories are responsible for the regulation of health professionals. For medical practitioners, registration is granted by the relevant state or territory medical registration board.

An overseas trained doctor must obtain general registration in order to be eligible to apply for migration under the General Skilled Migration scheme. Full, unconditional or general medical registration is available:

1. to graduates of Australian or New Zealand Australian Medical Council-accredited medical schools who have completed an approved period of intern training, or
2. to persons holding primary medical qualifications obtained overseas, who have successfully completed the Australian Medical Council examination (both the multiple choice questionnaire and the clinical examination) and have been awarded the Australian Medical Council Certificate, and have completed a period of supervised training approved by a State or Territory Medical Board.

Overseas trained general practitioners and other specialists seeking to obtain general registration must be recognised by the relevant specialist college accredited by the Australian Medical Council.

For overseas trained doctors willing to work in areas of need, pathways exist for conditional registration. The assessment process for conditional registration is different to the assessment process for general registration. Temporary resident doctors usually apply for conditional registration. Overseas trained doctors with conditional registration are not eligible for entry under the General Skilled Migration scheme.

English language proficiency is assessed using the International English Language Testing System or equivalent test. The minimum score required differs between the states and territories, but medical boards have recently agreed to implement a nationally consistent standard.

Australian Government legislation affecting Medical Practitioners

For medical practitioners, the Australian Government has enacted legislation, the *Health Insurance Act 1973* ("the Act"), which determines eligibility requirements for medical practitioners to provide services to patients that are eligible for a Medicare rebate.

Section 19AA of the Act requires overseas trained doctors who are permanent residents or Australian citizens to have vocational recognition of an appropriate medical college, or be undertaking an approved training or workforce program in order to obtain access to Medicare benefits.

In addition, overseas trained doctors who were first recognised as medical practitioners under the Act on or after 1 January 1997 are ineligible to provide services that attract Medicare benefits for a period of 10 years (under section 19AB of the Act). Exemptions to section 19AB can be granted to overseas trained doctors working in districts of workforce shortage.

Specialists who work in private practice in Australia must apply to the Health Insurance Commission to be recognised as a specialist or consultant physician so that they can provide services which attract Medicare benefits at the higher specialist or consultant physician rates.

Applications from overseas trained specialists who are temporary residents in Australia are considered under section 3E of the Act. To be eligible for recognition under section 3E, applicants should either be registered to practise in a particular specialty by a state and territory medical registration board or have been awarded general medical registration by one of the medical boards and fellowship of an Australasian specialist medical college.

2. How Australia's arrangements compare with those of other major immigration countries.

Overseas trained doctors wishing to work in Australia are assessed with regard to their suitability according to Australian standards. We understand that Australian standards are broadly comparable to other developed countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada and the Republic of Ireland.

Under *Strengthening Medicare*, the Australian Government has worked to reduce red tape and streamline assessment processes for overseas trained doctors (see response to 3 below). These changes have made Australia a more attractive option for overseas trained doctors.

3. Areas where Australia's procedures can be improved.

In 18 November 2003, the Australian Government announced its *Strengthening Medicare Package* which includes a range of measures designed to address Australia's short and longer term medical workforce needs. The package contains a number of initiatives that will increase opportunities for appropriately qualified overseas trained doctors to enter the Australian medical workforce.

These initiatives include:

- International recruitment strategies;
- Opportunities for doctors to stay longer or obtain permanent residency through changes to immigration arrangements;
- Improved training arrangements and additional support programs;
- Reduced "red tape" in approval processes; and
- Assistance for employers and overseas trained doctors in arranging placements.

International Recruitment Strategies

- The Strengthening Medicare package has already lifted the number of appropriately qualified overseas trained doctors working in Australia.
- As at 21 June 2005, 166 overseas trained doctors have been placed in areas of workforce shortage as a result of Australian Government recruitment activity involving eleven recruitment agencies. Another 177 doctors have signed employment contracts and will commence work soon.

Improved Immigration Arrangements

- From 19 December 2003, the maximum visa validity period for temporary resident doctors (subclass 422) visa was extended from two to four years. Since then, over 1,500 temporary resident doctors have been granted a visa for greater than two years.
- Medical practitioners are now listed on the Skilled Occupations List used for the General Skilled Migration Program. This change came into effect in May 2004 and means that medical practitioners who satisfy state and territory medical board requirements for general medical registration will no longer require a sponsor to migrate to Australia.
- From April 2005, sponsors and doctors have been able to apply for a Temporary Business Entry (subclass 457) visa on the internet. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs has also introduced priority processing of visa applications for medical practitioners.

Improved Training and Support

- The Australian Government is providing funding to support the establishment of upskilling positions to provide selected overseas trained specialists with up to 24 months of additional training to assist them with gaining College Fellowship. Twenty-two positions have already been established with up to two additional positions currently being negotiated.
- The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners has been engaged to identify, assess and counsel those permanent resident overseas trained doctors not currently in the medical workforce and determine which of them could potentially practise medicine in Australia. The College will develop an individual learning plan for each doctor to assist them prepare for the Australian Medical Council examinations to obtain medical registration.
- The Australian Government has also provided \$0.5 million per year for training and mentoring under the Five Year Program: a national program to encourage overseas trained general practitioners to work in rural and remote locations. A similar program for overseas trained doctors on the Rural Locum Relief Program has also been implemented.

Reduced Red Tape in Approval Processes

- Extensive consultation has taken place with stakeholders to reduce red tape in the assessment, registration and employment of overseas trained specialists.
- Selected specialist medical Colleges are being funded to establish pilot rapid assessment units within their College. Funding is being provided to enable the Colleges to establish streamlined administrative and assessment processes. Funding agreements have been finalised with the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia and the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists.
- The Australian Medical Council has streamlined the clinical exam for medical registration. An additional 220-250 overseas trained doctors per year are meeting their requirements as a result of this streamlining.

Assistance for overseas trained doctors and employers in arranging placements

- A website has been launched which provides information for Australian employers and overseas trained doctors, regarding which general practices are located in districts of workforce shortage.
- Since May 2005, a new website, *DoctorConnect*, has been available that provides authoritative information to assist overseas trained doctors and Australian employers understand the requisite approval processes for entering the Australian medical workforce. An online cultural training program will soon be accessible through *DoctorConnect* and negotiations are currently underway to allow access to some specialty-specific on-line orientation modules for overseas trained specialists in the future. The website will be supported by an email contact and call centre facility.

I trust this information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely

Juleen Browning
A/g Assistant Secretary
Health Workforce Branch
27 June 2005