



Media release

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Medical Board to fund health program/s for doctors

The Medical Board of Australia will fund a health program or programs for doctors from the 2013/2014 financial year, from within existing resources.

The external health program/s will complement the core role of the Board and the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) which is to manage practitioners with impairment that may place the public at risk. The external health program/s will not have a regulatory role, but rather, will focus on supporting and promoting doctors' health.

"The Board is now focussed on planning what model of external health services it will fund and does not foresee the need to increase registration fees for this purpose," said Medical Board Chair, Dr Joanna Flynn AM.

As a starting point, the Board has clearly defined its role and responsibilities in relation to managing impaired practitioners under the National Law.

"Clear delineation between the regulatory role of the Board in managing impaired practitioners and the role of an external health program in supporting doctors and promoting doctors' health is critical to managing risk to the public and avoiding confusion for practitioners," Dr Flynn said.

One of the principles underpinning the Boards planning for a health program for doctors is to provide equitable access for all practitioners.

"We are committed to establishing a health program for doctors, separate from the Board's regulatory function, that is useful for the profession and accessible fairly to doctors in Australia, wherever they live," Dr Flynn said.

"We are now starting the planning and thinking to make this happen and will keep the profession informed about progress in the months ahead," she said.

The role of the Board: practitioners with impairment

The National Law defines impairment as a physical or mental impairment, disability, condition or disorder (including substance abuse or dependence) that detrimentally affects or is likely to detrimentally affect the person's capacity to practise the profession.

The Medical Board has an important role in relation to practitioners who have an impairment. The Board must assess the risk to the public that the practitioner may pose and if necessary take steps to monitor their health and/or restrict their practice.

The Board must comply with the guiding principle of the National Law that 'Boards should only impose restrictions on the practice of a health profession if it is necessary to ensure health services are provided safely and are of an appropriate quality'. In effect, the Board takes a risk-based approach which is non-punitive, and which aims to keep practitioners at work if it is safe to do so.

External health programs

The National Law gives the Board discretion to fund health programs for practitioners and medical students. The National Law defines 'health program' as education, prevention, early intervention, treatment or rehabilitation services relating to physical or mental impairments, disabilities, conditions or disorders, including substance abuse or dependence. The term 'health program' refers to external health programs.

Most Australian states and territories have developed services to assist medical practitioners with health concerns. There is currently significant variation in the type and level of service offered by the existing programs around Australia, ranging from telephone advisory services, through to assessment and case management of practitioners. There is also significant variation in funding of these services. Many operate on the goodwill of volunteers while others have more substantial funding. In two states, doctors' health programs have continued to be funded through registration fees of medical practitioners raised by the state medical boards before the introduction of the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme.

Consultation so far

The Australian Health Workforce Ministerial Council asked the Board to consider continuing the Victorian Doctors Health Program and to expand it nationally. Responding to this request, in 2012 the Board consulted with stakeholders about whether the Board should be funding external health programs for medical practitioners and if so, to what level and what services should be provided.

The feedback from the consultation is published at www.medicalboard.gov.au. There was general support for the Board to fund health services for medical practitioners, but no agreement on what services should be funded. There was a widespread view that any program should be funded from within the Board's current registration fee, rather than requiring a specific fee increase.

For more information

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