



Widening pupils

GETTING MEDICAL STUDENTS AND YOUNG DOCTORS INTERESTED IN PATHOLOGY IS CRITICAL TO ADDRESSING THE WORKFORCE SHORTAGE. KIM COTTON UNCOVERS A RANGE OF STRATEGIES THAT ARE ENJOYING SUCCESS.

If you ask medical students what goes on inside a pathology lab, you might get a few blank stares.

For many, pathology remains in the laboratory – out of sight, out of mind – as young students are lured to medical specialties that dominate the hospital wards.

Downsizing of pathology subjects at medical schools over the past decade and the elevation of problem-based learning are deemed by some to be largely to blame.

And fewer qualified pathology lecturers at some universities has meant there are limited opportunities for student exposure to mentors who are passionate about the discipline.

It's feared that this, combined with a growing pathology workforce crisis, is becoming a toxic cocktail.

So what's the antidote?

Like most complex problems, there's no single answer, but the pathology profession has begun the process of changing mindsets by starting at the grassroots – with the students themselves.

Opening budding doctors' eyes to the possibilities of pathology is taking several forms.

At Sullivan Nicolaidis Pathology (SNP) in Queensland, employing medical and

science students part-time is paying dividends.

"The approach has got great benefits because for most people what goes on in labs is unknown to them – they are the original black box," says SNP chief executive officer Dr Michael Harrison.

"This last year here in the main lab we had five of our young scientists successfully join the graduate medical course. Because of their experience in a laboratory there is a good chance they will come back as pathologists."

Opening doors

Dr Tim Khamu is one of SNP's success stories.

A science graduate, Dr Khamu began working as an SNP laboratory assistant during his first year of medicine at the University of Queensland in 2002. As a matter of course, he went on to do his fourth-year MBBS elective at SNP's histopathology department, where he gained a deeper understanding of histology, histopathology and cut-up skills.

He was subsequently offered a regular cut-up position at SNP during his intern year. And this has led to a place in the Queensland Health pathology training program – he is now placed for his first year as an anatomical pathology registrar at SNP's main Taringa laboratory.

"I began considering anatomical pathology as a career path during my third year of medical training. My time at SNP gave me the necessary insight to make a well-informed choice," Dr Khamu says.

"The knowledge and skills I gained made the transition to my registrar position smoother, while being integral now to my day-to-day work."

Dr Harrison says working in a lab gives all medical students valuable experience because they learn the rigours of quality control and quality assurance, how to build systems and processes that are safe and accurate, and how to scientifically evaluate and assess the value of what they're doing.

"Even if they don't come back to pathology as a career I think they will have achieved a basic understanding of those principles, which will stand them in a really good stead."

The caveat to employing medical and other university students as lab assistants without formal qualifications is the need for them to commit to the job for several years, Dr Harrison adds.

"Once people commit to it I don't know of anybody who has worked here as a medical student who has not said they've gotten great benefit from it personally – and of course the money doesn't hurt either!"

“My time at SNP gave me the necessary insight to make a well-informed choice.”

– Dr Tim Khamu



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RCPA scholarships popular

Another approach to stimulating student interest in pathology is the scholarship route.

The RCPA has offered its Scholarships in Pathology for Medical Schools for 10 years and by all accounts, inroads are being made.

“The idea is to give \$2000 to allow students to either go into a lab in their own city or travel to a lab somewhere else to work with a pathologist to see what’s actually involved,” says RCPA CEO Dr Debra Graves.

“It’s fairly flexible in how they can use it. It’s an incentive to think about doing pathology.”

The program of up to eight scholarships is made available annually to Australian and New Zealand universities that have a medical school or medical faculty. Two of these scholarships are offered to the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Papua New Guinea.

Dr Graves says the funds support medical students’ participation in a pathology-related project under the supervision of an RCPA fellow during an elective term or for the duration of their medical degree.

Rosalyn Hunt, a fourth-year medical student at the Australian National University (ANU), became an RCPA scholarship recipient last summer. She

used the funds to complete her elective in anatomical pathology at The Canberra Hospital under Professor Jane Dahlstrom, a pathologist and Professor at the ANU Medical School.

“An elective allows you to appreciate the lifestyle and training area of medicine and whether that’s going to suit you. It was really valuable from that point of view,” says Ms Hunt, who now has a better feeling for the nuts and bolts of pathology.

Vacation scholarships

Another avenue for medical students to road-test pathology is via hospital salaried specialists’ private practice funds, which make money available for various causes including pathology scholarships.

The \$2000 Private Practice Fund vacation scholarship offered at The Canberra Hospital is similar in structure to the RCPA scholarship, allowing six medical students each year to take on a supervised project during their elective across any department.

For Dr Andrea Rapmund, the opportunity to complete her elective in anatomical pathology under Professor Dahlstrom with the support of a vacation scholarship was the cornerstone in her decision to pursue pathology.

Now an anatomical pathology registrar, Dr Rapmund was able to immerse herself in the program without having to worry about juggling part-time work. She spent

part of her time in the lab and was required to produce a lecture on gastrointestinal pathology as well as a practical, which is now being used by second-year students at the ANU Medical School.

“[I got a] much better idea of what my job would be as a pathology registrar so I was able to come into it knowing what my day-to-day duties would be and [also gained] an interest in medical education – I didn’t expect that,” she says.

The anatomical pathology elective program developed by Professor Dahlstrom has in itself become a promotional device for the profession.

“The program is unique because it involves all aspects of pathology and it offers a medical education component,” she says.

“Some of it is about the consolidation of knowledge, the other is to try and help a student understand that as a pathologist my job is so varied and interesting.”

Despite the competition for vacation scholarships across The Canberra Hospital, Professor Dahlstrom says her students have always received hospital funding to participate in the program since its development in 2003.

“I think the reason the program is successful and that students receive funding is that the scholarship committee knows from the student report how much they enjoy the program and what they have achieved,” she says. 





Private schooling

THE PRIVATE SECTOR HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY IN TRAINING AUSTRALIA'S FUTURE PATHOLOGISTS.

Three years ago, a commitment was made that would leave a significant imprint on pathology training in Australia.

The federal government's \$3.75 million in funding for the Private Practice Training Scheme (PPTS) saw the introduction of a unique training model that it is hoped will make a dent in the pathology workforce shortage.

Under the scheme, the private sector is responsible for training 10 doctors to become pathologists. Each position is funded for \$75,000 per year for five years (until 2009) with the provision that registrars spend two years training in public hospitals.

RCPA CEO Dr Debra Graves says while the scheme has placed pathology further ahead of other medical specialties on private training, moving away from the traditional public hospital training model has been a matter of necessity. While the public sector has the capacity to take on registrars, there are not enough pathologists available in the labour-intensive specialty to train all the new pathologists that are needed.

"Opening up the private sector... has increased the pool of pathologists who can actually train the doctors to become pathologists," she says.

"It's a good partnership between the public and private sector – it's a model that gives the labs a lot of flexibility so it is not prescriptive to the [last] degree."

The government's agreement to fund the program was part of the *Pathology Quality and Outlays Memorandum of*

"There used to be quite a significant difference between public pathology and private pathology and slowly as time goes by those differences are disappearing." – Dr Michael Guerin

Understanding 2004/05–2008/09, developed in consultation with the RCPA, Australian Association of Pathology Practices and National Coalition of Public Pathology.

It came in response to the 2003 Australian Medical Workforce Advisory Committee report recommending an extra 100 pathology training positions annually for at least five years to sustain the profession.

Dr Graves says there should have been 400 new places established since the report's release, and instead there have been just 53 (soon to be 63).

But she says the 10 positions generated by the PPTS have been a "big contributing factor" to the overall numbers of new training positions.

"It's very helpful and we're very appreciative. It certainly recognised there was a need for this well before the state governments did anything about it."

Meshing together

Dr Michael Guerin, president of the Australian Association of Pathology Practices and chief medical officer at Symbion Health, says the new training model is strengthening and broadening the profession by merging the individual skill bases practised within each sector.

"There used to be quite a significant difference between public pathology and private pathology and slowly as time goes by those differences are disappearing," he says.

"It won't be all that long before it will be difficult to pick if you're with a private or a public organisation."

The scheme is also expanding the scope of opportunities for private sector pathologists.

"Almost in every pathologist there is a latent teacher. What it does is bring satisfaction to those individuals," Dr Guerin says.

A spokeswoman for federal health minister Tony Abbott says the government is in consultation with the RCPA over a \$60 million plan to expand training in private settings across many different specialty areas.

A very recent development has seen a further 10 positions created by the Commonwealth, which will be managed by the PPTS.

Dr Graves says any other additional funding that becomes available will be used to create up to another 30 positions in private laboratories based on their training capacity. 🔥



First new RCPA Fellow: **Dr Aman Alash**

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– Dr Debra Graves

While most of the registrars who joined the Private Pathology Training Scheme will complete their training in 2009, it has already been a long journey for Dr Aman Alash (above), an Iraqi-born pathologist who is the first federally funded trainee to successfully complete the RCPA fellowship.

Previously a senior lecturer at Al-Mustansiriya University's College of Medicine in Baghdad and in charge of the attached hospital's histopathology and cytology departments, Dr Alash fled the war-torn country with her husband and children in 2001.

She travelled with her family to Yemen and was employed as a consultant pathologist in one of the private hospitals before leaving for the United Arab Emirates, where she continued working.

Dr Alash arrived in Australia in 2003 to establish a new life with her family

She applied to the RCPA for assessment as an overseas-trained doctor when the PPTS was being rolled out and was offered a registrar position in anatomical pathology at the Victorian-based laboratory Symbion Health.

Dr Alash passed her exams on the first sitting and in January this year attained her college fellowship. She says the support and encouragement she received from colleagues and family helped her complete the fellowship in such a short period of time.

“It's a big relief,” she says.

“It's a stepping stone to achieving a bigger dream of specialising in cytology or breast pathology.”