Australian general practitioner doctorates and doctoral candidates, 2005–2009

To the Editor: The decline in the number of National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) scholarships awarded to general practitioners over the past 9 years reflects continuing problems in Australia's capacity to produce a good base of general practice researchers. Since 1998, 20 GPs have received NHMRC doctoral scholarships; nine of these were granted in 2002 and six were granted after 2002.

Over the financial year 2010–11, I used key informants, university theses repositories and internet searching, to identify 41 GPs (22 men, 19 women) who were awarded Australian university doctorates on a medical subject between 1 January 2005 and 31 December 2009. Most were PhDs, seven were doctor of medicine (MD) degrees and one was a doctor of public health degree. Seven universities belonging to the "Group of eight", a coalition of leading Australian universities describing itself as "intensive in research", awarded 60% of doctorates (Box).

Successful candidates were usually experienced GPs (median time since first medical degree, 20 years) and were more likely to hold a fellowship from the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (FRACGP, 75%), the diploma in obstetrics (30%), a previous masters degree (50%) or have had paid university employment (50%) than other GPs.[1,2]

Sixteen candidates held post-graduate scholarships: NHMRC (14), the National Institute of Clinical Studies (1), and a state government scheme (1). Four of the 20 GPs who received NHMRC scholarships since 1998 have yet to submit theses.

All 41 GPs awarded doctorates by Australian universities had published journal articles recorded by MEDLINE (median, 13 articles; range, 1–73 articles). They first published a median of 10 years before submitting their theses. Half of the candidates' publication output was published by three Australian medical journals: *Australian Family Physician* (32%), the *Medical Journal of Australia* (17%) and the *Australian Journal of Rural Health* (3%).

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Source of doctorates and primary medical degrees for general practitioners awarded a doctorate by an Australian university from 1 January 2005 to 31 December 2009

University	Doctorate	Primary medical degree
Group-of-eight* members		
Monash University	3	4
University of Adelaide	3	6
University of Melbourne	5	4
University of Queensland	7	7
University of New South Wales	1	4
University of Sydney	4	5
University of Western Australia	2	3
Other		
Charles Darwin University	1	
Flinders University	2	2
James Cook University North Queensland	2	
University of Newcastle	6	2
University of Oxford		1
University of Tasmania	4	3
University of Wollongong	1	

*Coalition of leading Australian universities which includes the seven above plus the Australian National University. ◆

Although Australia performs well by international standards (three New Zealand GPs obtained a doctorate over the study period and Scottish GPs took 30 years to achieve the same number of doctorates[3]), NHMRC scholarship awards suggest that other kinds of Australian medical doctors vastly outperform GPs in attaining doctorates (204 physicians and physician trainees received an NHMRC PhD scholarship in the 5-year period).

These findings are a concern for general practice. The number of high-calibre researchers with doctorates is low, and research skills are developed late in GPs' professional careers.

The barriers hindering GPs from undertaking higher research degrees identified in 2005[4] remain unaddressed. More young doctors would consider entering general practice if better opportunities for research existed.[5]

An urgent rethink of general practice researcher development in Australian universities, health departments and medical research bodies is required.

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5 Sivey P, Scott A, Witt J, et al. Why junior doctors don't want to become general practitioners: a discrete choice experiment from the MABEL longitudinal study of doctors. Melbourne Institute Working Paper Series. Working Paper No.17/10. Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2010. ❑