



Abbott rejects tests for overseas doctors

By Tom Noble

Health Editor

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Appeals to Canberra to take charge of the medical standards of overseas-trained doctors have been rejected by Health Minister Tony Abbott, who says doctor registration and assessment is a matter for state and territory registration boards.

Thousands of overseas-trained doctors are working in Australia without their medical knowledge or clinical skills being formally tested, raising fears for patient safety.

Leading medical groups have called for national standards that require all doctors to be tested before they begin work to protect the public and maintain medical standards.

Victoria's Health Minister, Bronwyn Pike, wrote to Mr Abbott last week urging him to adopt a Victorian model that tests doctors, using a multiple-choice test and clinical exam, before they work.

Victoria has not implemented the scheme because it fears the tests, if adopted solely by Victoria, would scare away medical staff, particularly British-trained junior doctors on working holidays who have become a key part of emergency departments.

Mr Abbott said while he would like state systems to be harmonised, "I'm not going to buy into a quagmire where the Federal Government has responsibility but no authority".

Royal Australian College of General Practice vice-president Vasantha Preetham said some doctors recruited by the Government to plug GP shortages in remote and rural areas had begun work without assessment or any commitment to undertake continuing medical education. Australian Medical Association federal president Mukesh Haikerwal said doctors being recruited under the Government's scheme should be assessed before they leave for Australia.

Australian Doctors Trained Overseas Association president Andrew Schwartz said he believed doctors' skills could be assessed within a short time in a major hospital. "We need to have appropriate standards in place. I wouldn't want to be treated by an incompetent doctor."

But he said there was no evidence that overseas-trained doctors had a higher incidence of complaints or problems and he was deeply concerned about racist sentiments stirred by the inquiry into rogue Queensland surgeon Jayant Patel.

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