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Alarm at vetting of overseas doctors

By Hedley Thomas

A GROWING number of overseas doctors rushed into Queensland public hospitals and private medical centres lack "medical competence and capability", according to a leaked Government report.

The lack of competence of overseas-trained doctors was putting patients, employers and the community at risk, the report said.

Senior doctors in the public and private sector have told The Courier-Mail that Queensland Health, the Federal Government and the Medical Board of Queensland were compromising public safety by failing to check the clinical skills of imported doctors.

Health Minister Wendy Edmond and the Medical Board of Queensland have rejected the charges. They say the report, written by Queensland Health's medical adviser for rural health services, Dr Denis Lennox, has no official status with the Government.

But they acknowledged the need for a more rigorous screening process because of the rising numbers of doctors being recruited from Third World countries to help alleviate a shortage, particularly in regional and rural areas.

Dr Lennox's draft report identifies grave concerns regarding overseas-trained doctors being plucked from Third World countries after a bare minimum of screening.

The chronic shortage of doctors in Australia and particularly in rural and regional Queensland has led in recent years to aggressive recruitment drives in poorer countries by non-medical entrepreneurs and private agencies operating on commissions.

The medical schools in some of these countries, including Bangladesh, Ghana, Nigeria and Pakistan, produce graduates from non-English speaking backgrounds at a lower standard than those who study at Australian medical schools.

The leaked Queensland Health report warns of serious clinical safety issues and argues for a complete overhaul of the flawed system for recruiting, screening and managing doctors who come to Queensland to work in public hospitals and as rural GPs.

It urges Ms Edmond to back a new system which demands mandatory vocational qualifications to "protect the community from incompetent medical practise and consequent adverse outcomes".

"Evidence is increasing of increased risk of overseas-trained doctor recruits being insufficiently assessed and prepared for practise in Queensland under pressure of recruitment of such increasingly large numbers," Dr Lennox's report warns.

"Some recent experience of overseas-trained doctors without the competence or capability for medical practise in Queensland presages adverse outcomes for patients, employers, community and medical profession."

Ms Edmond's office refused The Courier-Mail's request for a copy of the report.

"This report has no official status and was not accepted or endorsed by Queensland Health Executive," she said.

Adverse outcomes, or cases of medical negligence harmful to patients, linked to doctors imported to Queensland have not been systematically documented.

But a number of alarming cases, including deaths, have been reported to The Courier-Mail.

Even some overseas-trained doctors working in rural Queensland have expressed astonishment at the lack of scrutiny of their qualifications, experience and ability to diagnose and treat patients and operate in Australia's health system.

Senior clinicians fear that negligence by the doctors will lead to more legal action, putting further strain on the public system's finances as well as on doctors already battling to pay hefty insurance premiums.

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Fears grow over vetting procedures

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A loose regulatory framework combined with a desperate demand has seen more than 1600 overseas

doctors approved for rural and regional Queensland in the past financial year.

Queensland public hospitals would collapse without overseas-trained doctors, who make up almost half of the 900 resident medical officers employed by Queensland Health.

Ms Edmond has said the traditional flow of doctors from England, Ireland and Scotland had ebbed but that it was immoral and a disgrace Queensland now relied on countries such as Botswana, Iraq and Fiji for doctors.

Queensland will continue to rely heavily on overseas-trained doctors for at least five years and possibly longer because of population growth and an inadequate supply of graduates.

But international demand will force Queensland to recruit more doctors "from non-English speaking backgrounds and from medical schools with less alignment to Australia's medical schools", according to the report by Dr Lennox.

Under present arrangements some doctors who trained overseas but lack vocational qualifications can be recruited to practise indefinitely in Queensland without mandatory testing or screening of their clinical and communication skills.

Dr Lennox's report said this was a "significant anomaly" because Australian graduates without such qualifications were generally not allowed to practise under those circumstances.

It recommended mandatory pathways to accredit, mentor, support and educate imported doctors to ensure they were "appropriately qualified for practise in Queensland, achieve vocational status equivalent to Australian graduates and cannot be abused as medical practise cannon fodder in inappropriate practise . . ."

LANGUAGE BARRIER

Examples of the communication skills of some overseas-trained doctors working in Queensland hospitals.

* I need to get to know the Australian healthcare cistern (sic).

* How long have you been a pain in the neck?

* Doctor: Well, Miss Jennifer, I've just examined that lump in your upper quadrant and you've got cancer. Are you happy about that?

* To a pregnant woman:

Sex? You must never have sex. You are not a married woman.

* To a woman with a sexually transmitted disease: You will need to iron your cervix.

* This patient is delusional. Crazy. Crazy pain in the head. He kept saying that he was kangaroo (The patient was a jackaroo).

* To a sexually active 15-year-old female: You wait now until you are marry (sic) to a man. I no can give you pills. I talk your mother.

Source: Clinical Bridging Program, Overseas-trained doctors program, University of Queensland

Caption: On Page 4: A surgeon performing an operation, Graph showing LANGUAGE BARRIER

Examples of the communication skills of some overseas-trained doctors working in Queensland hospitals, Source: Clinical Bridging Program, Overseas-trained doctors program, University of Queensland

Illus: Photo

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