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Doctors fear for standards

By Hedley Thomas and Steven Wardill

DOCTORS appealed to the Beattie Government yesterday to investigate concerns about the skills of growing numbers of doctors rushed from developing countries into Queensland's health system. A draft Queensland Health report, revealed in yesterday's The Courier-Mail, exposed claims that Queensland's reliance on overseas-trained doctors, particularly in rural and regional areas, could be affecting standards.

The report said doctors from some developing nations might not have adequate qualifications and that some had difficulty communicating with patients.

The draft report's findings were endorsed by the Australian Medical Association, Royal Australasian College of Surgeons and the Australian Salaried Medical Officers' Federation Queensland. Several national studies and expert evidence to the Senate inquiry into Medicare have expressed concern about the issues raised in the report.

Health Minister Wendy Edmond has refused to endorse or accept the report, written by a top adviser. She and the Queensland Medical Board said there was nothing to suggest any problem with the standards of overseas doctors.

Her stance comes amid moves by the Medical Board, the Australian Medical Council and other states to allocate funds and develop better systems to screen overseas doctor applicants and to mentor and supervise them properly.

Premier Peter Beattie said Queensland "wouldn't need any overseas doctors if we were training more" and he blamed the Federal Government and the colleges.

"When this final report is completed, as opposed to a draft, then obviously Cabinet will want to have a very close look at it," he said. "If the reports in The Courier-Mail and the draft report are sustained in the final report then we will need to change our systems and we will."

Dr Anne Kolbe, the Queensland-trained president of the college of surgeons, said: "It is a huge issue and I don't understand how Wendy Edmond can say what she's said.

"Queensland Health has to stop thinking only about putting doctors' bums on seats and worrying more about the qualifications of doctors and the quality of service they can deliver."

Opposition health spokeswoman Fiona Simpson called on Ms Edmond to act on the report rather than bury it.

"We can't have patients and staff put at risk because Queensland Health has not properly assessed overseas doctors," Miss Simpson said.

AMAQ president elect David Molloy said the problems were symptomatic of under funding of the state's public hospital system.

"We have to make a better investment in the system and sort it out," Dr Molloy said. "In the AMA our natural inclination is to protect the medical system, but the fact is when doctors are asked to work beyond their level, the potential is there for adverse outcomes."

Nick Buckmaster, president of ASMOFQ, said public hospital doctors in Queensland had identified language difficulties and poor quality medical practices" from some overseas-trained doctors.

He said that while the majority recruited were fine and coping well, a significant minority did not have appropriate skills.

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