

Medical community divided over physician assistants scheme

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The shortage of doctors, nurses and allied health professionals across the country is a problem acknowledged by most sides of the health debate.

But the Australian Medical Association (AMA) has warned that a proposal to reduce doctor shortages by training physician assistants will compromise patient safety.



Physician assistants, who work alongside doctors and perform minor surgical tasks, are widely used in the US, Canada, England and Scotland. (File photo) (ABC TV: ABC TV)

Physician assistants, who work alongside doctors and perform minor surgical tasks, are widely used in the United States, Canada, England and Scotland.

Now the Queensland Government is about to conduct a trial of their suitability in Australian hospitals.

Australian-trained physician assistants could be in the work force within four years, with two universities in Queensland already setting up training programs.

The University of Queensland is setting up a physician assistant course, expected to commence in 2009. If it proceeds, graduates will be in the work force by 2012.

James Cook University in northern Queensland is setting up a similar program, and the Queensland Government is about to undertake a trial with physician assistants from the United States working in its hospital system.

Professor Peter Brooks is the executive dean of health sciences at the University of Queensland.

"Every day you open the paper and you see yet another hospital that's having problems keeping its accident and emergency department open, patients having difficulty getting onto waiting lists," he said.

Professor Brooks is the head of the newly formed Australian Health Workforce Institute, a joint body established with Melbourne University to work out methods to reduce the shortage of health professionals across Australia.

Professor Brooks says one way this can be done is by introducing physician assistants. He says they have similar skills to nurses but the main difference is that at all times they work in conjunction with doctors.

"As a rheumatology physician assistant, you might be involved in injecting joints, in monitoring chronic therapy for a chronic disease like rheumatoid arthritis," he said.

"In a surgical discipline, in coronary bypass surgery, in the US they're often the people who take out the veins from the legs that are then put into the heart for the heart bypass - so they work complementary to a doctor."

Quality of health care

Physician assistants are viewed as a separate entity to nursing practitioners, and their function would not be to run independent clinics.

Professor Brooks is convinced of their value.

"There are lots of studies showing that the care that these people deliver in specific areas is just as good as a doctor," he said.

But the AMA doesn't agree. Its president, Dr Rosanna Capolingua, says the eventual result will be a reduction in the quality of patient care.

"When the physician assistant or whatever health service provider is involved in actually obtaining information from the patient, making an assessment, making a diagnosis and instigating a management or treatment plan, then the AMA believes that physician assistants ... do not have the high level of training, holistic understanding of an individual, and indeed then may be reducing the quality and safety of health care that Australians are accessing," she said.

But not all doctors agree on physician assistants. Dr Bill Glasson is a former president of the AMA and he says physician assistants are a possible way to overcome shortages in the health system.

"We do not want to undermine the training of our future generation of doctors coming through," he said.

"As a previous president of the AMA I'm very cognisant to that fact, but I'm also cognisant to the fact that unless we as a profession develop new models of care, integrated models where we utilise the resources of the doctors better, than we're not going to address increasing demand that we're going to face in the next 10 to 20 years." he said.

Federal Health Minister Nicola Roxon has ordered an audit to examine the reasons for the current doctor shortage across the country.

A spokesman for Ms Roxon would not comment specifically on physician assistants, but said all options that could reduce the shortage would be looked at.