

Title: Meeting community needs: inaugural JCU medical graduate careers

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What problem was addressed: In Australia there is maldistribution of the medical workforce with urban concentration and rural deficits. The medical school at James Cook University (JCU) opened in 2000 with strong local community support and was the first new medical school to open in Australia in 25 years. The bold vision of the school was to train and deliver more doctors to rural and northern Australia. The course curriculum was designed with a focus on rural, remote, Indigenous and tropical health and the school successfully recruited a high proportion of northern and rural background students.

The first graduates of the six year course entered the workforce in 2006, and there is strong interest in what these graduates have chosen to do during their first ten postgraduate years. This project aimed to survey the first graduates and to find out what employment opportunities these medical school graduates had undertaken, where postgraduate employment and training had been undertaken and why.

What was done: A literature review was undertaken to look at the relevant research currently available regarding the determinants of career choice of medical students and graduates in Australia.

A longitudinal mixed methods study was then undertaken with data collection from the first cohort of graduates from the James Cook University School of Medicine (n=58). The data was collected via a survey, which was distributed to the graduates through a password protected online portal with hard copy and electronic follow up. A 100% response rate was achieved.

Survey data was collated and the quantitative data was analyzed using simple bivariate descriptive statistics. Comparisons were made with the previous de-identified responses from the 2001 and 2011 data collection from the same cohort of graduates. A subgroup of participants was interviewed to further explore their experiences. Interviews were transcribed in full and analysed with an iterative thematic analysis.

What was learned: The majority of graduates have worked in rural, remote, Indigenous or tropical health related employment, with 71% currently working in regional, rural or remote areas. Only 18% of students intended to work in general practice when selected, yet 50% of the graduates have undertaken general practice training. More than 80% of graduates participate in teaching, and nearly 50% participate in undertaking research.

Career pathways are dynamic, with 55% of the graduates indicating a change of career path since commencing their medical degree. Major determinants of change included positive and negative experiences during training, mentors, family considerations and lifestyle factors.

Selecting local and rural background students and providing adequate local postgraduate training opportunities has improved local retention, and ultimately has resulted in an increased local workforce.

The focus on rural, remote, Indigenous and tropical health and strong promotion of general practice throughout the JCU medical course encouraged graduates to pursue careers in these fields. The focus on generalist career paths has resulted in 50% of graduates undertaking generalist careers.

Reference:

1. Veitch, C., Underhill, A. & Hays, RB. (2006). The career aspirations and location intentions of James Cook University's first cohort of medical students: a longitudinal study at course entry and graduation. *Rural and Remote Health*, 537. Retrieved from <http://www.rrh.org.au/articles/showarticlenew.asp?ArticleID=537>