

The impact of the pathology workforce crisis on acute health care

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Abstract

There is much talk of the crisis in medical workforce. This paper outlines the huge problem facing pathology services in Australia and the impact this will have on the delivery of health care services.

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WHILE THERE IS MUCH TALK of the crisis in medical workforce, few people seem to be aware of the huge problem facing pathology services in Australia, and the impact this will have on the delivery of health care services.^{1,2,3} The Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA), the body responsible for training doctors to become pathologists in Australasia, is extremely concerned about the impact the crisis in pathology will have on the health care system and has an active campaign trying to raise an awareness of the situation with governments, health departments, health administrators, other medical practitioners and the general public.

Part of this campaign is the production of a magazine titled *PathWay* that is distributed to over 30 000 medical practitioners, health administrators, politicians and the general community. The current edition highlights the serious crisis in the pathology workforce in Australia. The cover story “Where are all the pathologists . . . medicine’s endangered species” says it all.

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The importance of pathology

Pathology is a critical part of the medical process. Without high quality pathology services, health care will degenerate and services could eventually grind to a halt. Despite the critical role pathologists and pathology play in medicine, very few people understand what pathology is all about. Considered the backroom specialty of medicine, pathologists are rarely directly seen by patients and rarely acknowledged by health administrators and politicians as the important medical specialists that they are.

Unfortunately, unless a medical specialty is hitting the headlines in some way, such as surgical waiting lists, waiting times in emergency departments and, more recently, the problems with mental health in the community,³ politicians don’t listen and funding does not follow. As a consequence, the RCPA decided to create some headlines of its own. By increasing awareness, the RCPA hopes support will be given by governments to ensure the future of the profession.

The RCPA acknowledges this will not occur overnight, but hopes that slowly and surely the image of pathologists dealing only with dead people or automated blood tests will change. The reality is that pathologists are the specialists who diagnose all known cancers. They are involved in diagnosing infectious diseases such as golden staph and influenza. They play an important role in diagnosing and monitoring diseases such as diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis. They play an integral role in blood transfusion services and, more recently, they are to be found at the cutting edge of use of genetics in diagnosing disease. More than 70% of all diagnoses will involve pathology tests, and if you add the important role pathology plays in monitoring disease, it is apparent why this profession is critical.

Pathology is the specialty that looks at the underlying cause of all diseases. In fact, the RCPA says “Medicine is pathology”. Pathologists have subdisciplines which include anatomical pathology, chemical pathology, haematology, immunology, microbiology, genetics, and forensic pathology.

Why is this critical area of medicine an endangered species?

In the last 10 years in Australia, at least 70 training positions have been eliminated from the system by stressed health administrators trying to balance budgets in the short term.⁴ There was no imperative to plan for the longer term.

There are currently 1290 pathologists in active practice in Australia and 20% of these are over the age of 60. Almost half of these (or 130) are over the age of 65 years. Currently in Australia, we are able to produce only about 55 new pathologists each year on the funding made available by government.⁵ This is quite frightening when you consider the age profile of pathologists and the fact that there are at least 70 vacancies in the system for qualified pathologists that cannot be filled.

The crisis in pathology workforce is worldwide⁶ (for many reasons), and importing appropriately qualified pathologists to fix the problem is not an option. The RCPA has looked at many different options to solve the problem. Many health administrators suggest workforce substitution to address the workforce crisis. In pathology this has already occurred. Pathology is a team effort, with pathologists working closely with scientists and laboratory technicians. There are few additional areas where further delegation can occur, and there is a serious shortage of scientific staff in Australia.

The problem is purely one of governments not funding training positions.

The government-convened Australian Medical Workforce Advisory Committee (AMWAC) recommended in 2003 that Australia needs an extra 100 training positions each year for at least 5 years.⁵ Despite the fact that all state, territory and Commonwealth Health Ministers signed off on

this report, we are now in year three and there should be 300 positions — yet only 45 have been created ... a long way from the requirements.⁷

Queensland is the only state government that has taken the issue seriously, with the funding of 17 positions.^{7,8} The Commonwealth, as part of the pathology profession's memorandum of understanding for Medicare funding, has funded 10 positions for 5 years in the private sector.⁹ The profession has been requesting funding for an additional 40 positions for 5 years,¹⁰ to no avail. Other states and territories have provided the following: NSW — seed funding for four positions for 12 months only; one in the ACT; one in Tasmania; six in Victoria commencing in 2007; two in South Australia; and one in an initiative between an equipment manufacturer (Dade Behring), a private laboratory (Symbion) and a public laboratory (Pacific Laboratory Medicine Services [PaLMs]).

There are more medical students wanting to do pathology than there are training positions. There are plenty of laboratories that are accredited by the College for training that are ready and willing to train, there is just no funding from governments to provide these extra positions.

This crisis is not looming, it has arrived. The lack of pathologists is not being addressed by government. Action is required now to prevent the crisis from worsening. If this action does not occur, the RCPA is concerned that Australia's extremely high quality pathology services will not be sustainable into the future. There is a real risk that overworked, tired pathologists are more likely to make misdiagnoses. While there are very good quality systems in place to try to prevent this, mistakes in such environments are much more likely.

More specific examples of the impact on the health care system include:

- Without anatomical pathologists there will be delays in cancer diagnosis, with patients not being able to get access to the required treatment in a timely fashion leading to more morbidity and mortality
- Without microbiologists, infectious diseases may not be able to be diagnosed or treated

appropriately, leading to further spread of the illnesses with patients suffering and the health care system having to cope with more sick people

- Without haematologists blood transfusion would not be able to proceed safely and surgery would be a life threatening throw of a dice, as would the management of emergency trauma cases
- Bed blockages in hospitals will occur as will emergency department blocks when pathology results are not available
- Without chemical pathologists patients' heart attacks, diabetes and kidney failure would not be diagnosed promptly and managed appropriately
- Without immunopathologists and other pathologists patients with HIV/AIDS would not have tests available to them to monitor and titrate the toxic drugs they require for treatment
- Without genetic pathologists serious genetic conditions may not be screened and thus prevented, adding further burden to both patients and the health care system
- Finally, though more in the administration of justice, if there are no forensic pathologists autopsies and burials will be delayed causing families great stress, and in some cases criminals literally may get away with murder.

These scenarios are very frightening. Australia's medical system could end up at the standard of a developing country. The RCPA is certain that the people of Australia expect more. Governments must act quickly to address this issue. The accredited laboratories are there; the supervising pathologists are there — all that is lacking is the wherewithal to fund the training positions. Only governments can help, and they have a responsibility to do so!

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