



ANZCA

FPM

7 October 2024

President and CEO

Australian and New Zealand
College of Anaesthetists

Hon Mark Butler MP
Minister
Cwlth Government

Via email: Minister.butler@health.gov.au

Dear Minister

Urgent call for pause on the proposed expedited pathways for overseas trained doctors

As the President and CEO of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) we are writing to you to express our considerable concerns about the Australian Health Ministers Meeting directive on implementing expedited pathways for specialist international medical graduates (SIMGs) in Australia. We are particularly concerned at the lack of available information and ANZCA's limited involvement in developing the proposal.

Given the limited detail and the widespread concerns shared by all medical colleges for patient safety and quality of care we respectfully request that Health Ministers pause implementing this new scheme scheduled in late October 2024 for general practitioners and December 2024 for three other specialties including anaesthesia.

ANZCA is proud of its record over many years of assessing SIMGs within the timeframes set by regulators, equivalent to the proposed expedited pathway. We are both effective and efficient.

We acknowledge the pressing need to address workforce shortages in our healthcare system, particularly in rural and remote areas. We also recognise that internationally qualified health practitioners play a vital role in our health system and are needed to supplement critical vacancies in the short term. However, we strongly believe that the proposed model of expedited pathways for SIMGs, without the involvement of medical colleges, is a compromised solution and risks the high standards of medical care that Australians currently enjoy and rightfully expect, and will particularly impact our patients living outside metropolitan areas.

To date ANZCA has provided a range of considered, detailed submissions to the Medical Board of Australia (MBA) and the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra), including our recommendations for collaboration and highlighting the potential risks that decision-makers should be aware of.

We have also requested numerous times, along with many other medical colleges, further information on the proposed expedited pathway and the possibility to be more involved via a continuous consultation process throughout design and development, especially in light of the ambitious end-of-2024 timeframe.

Unfortunately, we have been provided with minimal information to date.

Our 'call for pause' position is based on the following key points, with patient safety always being our central priority.

1. Patient safety: Our current rigorous assessment and accreditation processes for SIMGs are designed to ensure that all practicing specialists in Australia meet the same high standards, regardless of where they received their initial training. Expedited pathways may inadvertently allow practitioners who are not fully prepared for the Australian healthcare context to practice independently, potentially putting patient safety at risk. We have seen this in the past with similar approaches to accreditation of overseas specialists.

2. Lack of crucial information: Ahpra and the MBA have not provided sufficient details about implementing these pathways, including information on qualification criteria, assessment processes, supervision arrangements, and monitoring processes. A fundamental change to regulatory settings would require a detailed plan to be made available for proper scrutiny before implementation.

3. Limited impact on regional shortages: The proposal does not include specific mechanisms to direct SIMGs to areas of greatest need, particularly in rural and remote locations. The MBA have advised medical colleges that addressing these challenges is not their role or responsibility. International medical graduates, like their Australian-trained counterparts, tend to gravitate towards metropolitan areas. Therefore, the expedited pathways fail to address the core issue of maldistribution of the medical workforce.

4. Quality of care: Australia's healthcare system is renowned globally for its high quality. This reputation is built on the foundation of stringent educational and training standards for all medical practitioners. As the guardians of the system that has enabled this high quality, the medical colleges are concerned that expedited pathways will erode this foundation and, in turn, the overall quality of our healthcare system. The current approach to implement this pathway has been done in haste and without full consideration of many risks.

5. Expertise-informed regulation: Specialist medical colleges play a crucial role in setting and maintaining professional standards that are the cornerstone of quality care and patient outcomes in Australia. We exist to teach, train and maintain excellence in specialist care. Greater recognition of this expertise is called for through more collaborative regulatory decision-making, emphasising the importance of specialty-specific nuances in these expedited pathways. The medical specialties are not a homogenous sector, and one-size-fits-all approaches will almost always lead to unintended consequences. It should be highlighted that the Australian healthcare system currently benefits from the pro bono contribution provided by medical colleges in supporting these current processes for assessment and ongoing support for SIMGs.

6. Equitable standards: It is vital that we maintain a single, high standard for all medical practitioners in Australia, whether they are trained domestically or internationally. Expedited pathways could create a two-tiered system, which would be unfair to both patients and practitioners and risks the quality of care received by Australians.

ANZCA's recommendation from the beginning has been to work closely with the Federal government to modify and develop one joint process (managed by the medical colleges, based on our intimate knowledge in this area) that has an expedited pathway within it that meets Ahpra's aims of expedited timeframes. ANZCA strongly believes that the safest, most efficient, and cost-effective approach to approving and supporting international anaesthetists to practice in Australia will be through partnership between ANZCA and Ahpra/MBA.

We also propose that we collectively focus on the following alternatives in parallel to continue to address workforce shortages:

- A longer-term or large-scale strategy of having adequate numbers of Australian trained doctors which comprises increased funding for training positions, particularly in underserved specialties and regions.
- Enhanced support and incentives for rural and remote placements for both trainees and established practitioners, with a focus on long-term retention strategies and career development opportunities.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues with you in more detail and to work collaboratively on solutions that address workforce needs without compromising quality and safety.

Thank you for your attention on this critical matter. We look forward to your response and to continuing this important dialogue.

Yours sincerely



Professor David Story
President



Mr Nigel Fidgeon
Chief Executive Officer