Project ‘comes of age’ as number of responses hits critical mass

The amount of data collected by the Medical Schools Outcomes Database and Longitudinal Tracking (MSOD) Project is set to more than double in the next three years as the project enters a new phase.

‘As we approach the 10th anniversary of the project it will really come of age,’ said MSOD Project Director Professor Don Roberton.

‘We now have 10,000 questionnaires coming in each year, which will more than double the size of the project’s database over the next three years and provide increasingly comprehensive data for Australia’s medical workforce planners.’

Professor Roberton said data collected by the project would be increasingly important for workforce planning, and would hopefully assist in averting a repeat of the recent intern crisis.

‘Knowing how many students we have, where they intend to practice and where they actually end up will be increasingly valuable,’ he said. ‘The challenge of finding enough places for interns in 2013 has highlighted the importance of planning and being able to rely on accurate data, and reinforces the valuable contribution the MSOD Project will be able to make.’ Since 2005, the Project has collected more than 27,000 questionnaires from students and doctors, amassing more than 1.5 million pieces of data in the process. ‘In 2005 we collected data from 878 medical students at six medical schools as they embarked on their first year of university,’ said Professor Roberton.

‘Three years later, in 2008, we received data from commencing students at all 18 medical schools, as well as the first group to leave university, this year we will collect data from more than 10,000 people in four distinct groups – commencing students, departing students and doctors in their first (PGY1) and third (PGY3) years post-graduation.’

The data provides robust and accurate information on medical students and their career intentions, including their intended area of specialty and where they want to practice geographically. It then follows those students as they become doctors and tracks them through their careers. The project plans to send questionnaires to medical graduates every two years until PGY18.

‘The MSOD Project has been a far-sighted initiative, and its importance is being increasingly recognised,’ Professor Roberton said. ‘While its original aim was to provide information for workforce planning, it is also proving an important research tool.

‘The database contains huge opportunities for research that will provide information about the outcomes of various medical programs, the influences on medical students during their medical school programs, and also the effects of government policies and how they support medical education, training and clinical placements.’

KEY FINDINGS

- 30% of CMSQ respondents indicate they have made a decision about the area of medicine they are interested in pursuing. This increases to 48% for EQ respondents and 64% for PGY1Q respondents.
- The proportion of respondents who indicate surgery as their preferred future vocation decreases from 27% in the CMSQ to 17% in the PGY1Q.

### NATIONAL DATA REPORTS

Three new national data reports are now online, with comprehensive details on more than 7,000 commencing students, exiting students and PGY1 participants in 2011. These reports primarily contain frequency tables with some quantitative analyses on demographic, educational and career intentions data.

The reports are available online at www.medicaldeans.org.au/medical-schools-outcomes-database/publications-resources/data-and-progress-reports

### MINISTER PRAISES PROJECT

In her speech at the 2012 Medical Education Conference on 21 September 2012, Minister for Health Tanya Plibersek recognised the unique value to the Government of the MSOD dataset for health workforce planning for Australia. The Minister said: ‘It is fitting that the conference focused on the themes of inclusion, innovation and investment. The partnership between Medical Deans and the Government is strong and inclusive, and our collaboration on innovations such as the Medical Schools Outcomes Database Project has been very positive. The MSOD is an ambitious initiative that has provided invaluable information to stakeholders on government investment in medical education and workforce planning.’

### ‘THANK YOU’ TO PARTICIPANTS

We would like to thank all those participants who have filled out questionnaires in 2012, including commencing medical students who filled out their CMSQ earlier in the year. We would also like to thank those exiting students, plus those in PGY1 and PGY3, who have already filled in their questionnaires. The information from these surveys is crucial to building an effective database, so we are keen to receive any outstanding questionnaires. All current surveys can be found at www.medicaldeans.org.au/medical-schools-outcomes-database/for-participants. Please contact us if you need any assistance.

### DATA FROM NZ SCHOOLS

The MSOD Project is planning to use its resources to assist New Zealand medical schools to produce a first set of national frequency reports. It is expected the reports will be useful for Health Workforce Australia and Health Workforce New Zealand as comparative data, as well as considering the impact of NZ medical graduates in the Australian workforce, and vice versa.
Eight research projects using MSOD data are under way, thanks to a partnership between Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand and the Australian Medical Students' Association. The $20,000 in grants provided by the MSOD Project has been split equally across eight student projects at six universities. Research topics include:

- Factors influencing medical students to pursue a career in psychiatry
- Demographic predictors of examination performance in medical students
- The relationship of marital status and maternity leave to career intentions
- The medical school elective and its relationship to later specialty choice
- Change over time in career intentions of graduate and undergraduate entry medical students.

Details of the projects are at http://www.medicaldeans.org.au/medical-schools-outcomes-database/msodamsa-student-grant

University of Melbourne student Bharathy Gunasekaran is examining the impact of limited internship placements on students’ choices for their preferred future medical practice and internship placement. ‘This research is significant given the recent media attention surrounding the issue of insufficient internship positions to accommodate the increasing numbers of locally trained medical graduates,’ she said. Bharathy, a Malaysian student in her fifth year, said the study also sought to assess the proportion of students who accepted an internship position in a non-urban healthcare setting which was not in their top four preference list, and the number of international students who accepted an internship position overseas despite their preference to complete their internship locally.

Iain Law is studying whether an international medical elective has any influence on future career preference. ‘Evidence from previous studies suggests students are more likely to go on to become GPs, work in primary care, public health or rural and disadvantaged areas if they have undertaken an international elective, especially in resource-poor settings,’ said Iain, a postgraduate student from Flinders University. ‘These studies fail to exclude the possibility that these students were going to do that in the first place. With the MSOD data we can look at what people wanted to do at the beginning compared with what they wanted at the end of their degree, and examine whether the elective had an impact.’

Seven students from the University of Western Sydney are assessing the influence of gender on interns’ (PGY1) specialty choices. ‘Our interest is in reassessing the relevance of traditional gender paradigms and their application to the current medical workforce,’ said Mitchell Purser, one of the students. ‘With changing gender roles and generational change we believe that factors traditionally thought of as important to women may have grown in importance to men,’ he said. ‘We hypothesise that there will be less disparity than commonly assumed between the proportion of men and women who are influenced by certain factors with regards to their specialty choices, and our study will test this hypothesis.’

Recent developments in the MSOD Project have been showcased at a conference organised by Health Workforce Australia. The aim of the conference workshop was to increase the profile of the MSOD Project and promote its latest activity to delegates at the two-day HWA Inspire Conference held in Melbourne in November. A highlight was the presentation of recent study findings by Professor Mike Jones from the Psychology Department of Macquarie University. Professor Jones outlined his ongoing research into the factors that influence people to practise in rural and remote areas, as opposed to urban areas. Professor Jones said his latest research aimed to establish the point at which students made their decision on where to practise. Early results showed that while many students changed their minds between the Commencing Questionnaire and the Exit Questionnaire, there was little change in intent between the EQ and PGY1. As a result Professor Jones said he became interested in the role of urban, rural and remote placements during a student’s medical studies, and whether the timing of those placements – early or late in their study – had any influence.

The workshop was also provided with an update on the Australian Medical School Mapper project, which applies mapping software to MSOD Project data, by Paul Konnings and Dr Ian McRae from the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute at the Australian National University. A summary was provided by MSOD Project Director Don Robertson and an overview of the MSOD Project’s application to workforce policy by HWA Executive Director Ian Crettenden.