STRONGER RURAL HEALTH STRATEGY
Overseas trained doctors in areas of doctor shortage

Under the Stronger Rural Health Strategy, the growth of Australia’s medical workforce will be better managed by regulating the number of overseas trained doctors seeking to work in Australia and directing them to areas of workforce shortage. These doctors will be directed away from over-serviced metropolitan and outer metropolitan areas to areas of workforce need, especially rural and remote areas.

Overseas trained doctors

Through the Skilled Migration Program, the number of overseas trained doctors entering Australia to work in primary health care will be reduced by 10 per cent – about 200 – annually over a period of four years. This will be a gradual process to ensure the right balance of specialist GPs is available to the Australian community, while also providing opportunities for Australian trained doctors.

Investment

Better managing the total number of doctors entering the medical workforce and directing them to areas of need will save $415.5 million over a four year period.

Savings from this measure are achieved by slowing the growth in the number of overseas trained doctors arriving in Australia, and the associated reduction in Medicare and Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) billing.

This is based on not paying the cost of services that would arise if the growth in the supply of doctors was not managed. Costs include Medicare, PBS Scheme, and diagnostic, pathology and specialist referral costs.

Target areas

Data shows that in some areas, particularly in major cities, the growth in medical services is due to an increase in the number of doctors, rather than genuine increases in patient need for services. Increasing numbers of overseas-trained doctors entering Australia have been working in major metropolitan areas rather than in rural and regional areas where there is a greater need.

Fewer overseas trained doctors in primary health care will ease pressure on training places, and give more opportunities to Australian trained medical graduates, whose numbers have also been growing.

This initiative will be supported by a new planning tool, which will support a more effective distribution of overseas trained doctors to areas of need – especially regional, rural and remote areas.

State and territory based employment arrangements

The recruitment of medical practitioners by state and territory governments who control and run rural hospitals will not be affected. The number of visas being issued to work in primary health care in metropolitan areas will be targeted and reduced over the next four years.
Visa changes

The number of visas being granted through the skilled migration program over four years from January 2019 will help to slow the growth in the number of overseas trained doctors entering Australia to work in metropolitan areas. The revised arrangements will target the occupations nominated by overseas-trained doctors seeking to work in primary health care in Australia: General Medical Practitioner, Resident Medical Officer and Medical Practitioner not elsewhere classified.

Reductions in total intake will be taken from major metropolitan locations, better managing the growth in general practice numbers anticipated in these areas, with improved targeting of visas to work in regional and rural Australia.

Improved targeting of areas of workforce shortage

The Department will work with Rural Workforce Agencies to ensure that overseas trained doctors are directed to areas of genuine workforce need. This will assist in better managing supply and pave the way for a more highly trained rural health workforce.

Further information

Updates on progress of the reform and further information: