



## June 2021: Update on the Bonded Medical Program

The Department is actively working with affected individuals to address the issues that arose during the early implementation of the statutory Bonded Medical Program (the Program) in 2020 and to minimise the impacts for them.

The Department has previously acknowledged that the process undertaken in seeking to bond participants under the Program during 2020 was not correct. When this was detected, the Program was paused to limit impact on affected individuals.

Whilst it will take some time to finalise up to 2,000 participant requests, the Department reaffirms the commitment that it will take a 'no disadvantage' approach to resolve the issues.

This process is well underway. The Department is and will be in contact with individuals to advise that their case has been allocated to a case manager. We appreciate your patience as we carefully work through each case.

### What were the issues?

The issues are detailed in the [May 2021 Update on the Bonded Medical Program](#)

### What progress has the Department made?

Essentially, there are three main groups of affected individuals:

- 1) Individuals who thought they were bonded, had completed their obligations and had exited the Program;
- 2) Individuals who thought they were bonded and still need to complete their RoSO;
- 3) Individuals who had expressed their interest to opt in and were awaiting a response.

In agreement with stakeholders – including the Australian Medical Association and the Australian Medical Students' Association – the Department is now working on 1) and 2) above as the priority.

We have commenced working with the individuals who thought they were bonded, had completed their obligations and exited the Program. The Department will then work with those individuals who were not correctly bonded and still need to complete their RoSO.

Those who expressed their interest to opt in will also be progressed in coming months.

## How will the Department resolve these issues?

In all instances, the Department will work with each affected individual to fully understand their personal circumstances from 2020 till now. This will ensure that any unintended consequences or breaches are managed. Fundamental to this approach is that there will be 'no disadvantage'.

As part of this process, affected individuals may be asked to provide more information such as any work activities undertaken since they were not correctly bonded. We will ensure that any work activities completed in good faith, consistent with the requirements of the statutory Program, will be counted towards the RoSO.

If, in changing their work activities, a participant has breached their legacy scheme agreement, the Department will seek to manage that breach, including removal of any possible Medicare ban and waiver of any associated financial liability. The affected individual will be notified of the Secretary's delegate's decision and outcome.

## Do you need a deferral or simultaneous work approval?

The Department has become aware that some legacy scheme participants waiting to opt in may be considering a change to their work activities in the next few months, and should take measures to ensure that any change they make won't breach their current agreement.

### *Medical Rural Bonded Scholarship (MRBS) Scheme participants*

The Department will email MRBS Scheme participants directly that have achieved fellowship and who may make a change to work activities which are not eligible for RoSO under their contract. These participants must obtain approval for deferral of RoSO or a simultaneous work approval before commencing work in the ineligible area.

If you are an MRBS Scheme participant and are seeking such a change, it is important that you send an email to the Department as soon as possible at:

[BondedMedicalProgram@health.gov.au](mailto:BondedMedicalProgram@health.gov.au) with '*MRBS Scheme – [Name] – Request for Deferral/Simultaneous Work Approval*' as the subject.

In addition to providing the details of your proposed work activities, you should also nominate the period you seek approval for.

The Department will prioritise these requests for deferrals and simultaneous work approvals and is only seeking responses from relevant MRBS Scheme participants at this time so that they do not breach their contract.

### *Bonded Medical Places (BMP) Scheme participants*

The Department appreciates that BMP Scheme participants may also make a change to work activities which are not eligible for RoSO under their deed of agreement.

Further to information provided in the May 2021 update, for BMP scheme participants, deferrals and simultaneous work approvals can be provided retrospectively as advised.

However, in accordance with the requirements of the BMP Scheme Deed of Agreement or Variation, we encourage participants to email the Department as soon as possible at:

[BondedMedicalProgram@health.gov.au](mailto:BondedMedicalProgram@health.gov.au) with '*BMP Scheme – [Name] – Request for Deferral/Simultaneous Work Approval*' to advise the proposed changes to work activities.

We will process these requests as soon as possible, noting that the Department is currently prioritising requests from MRBS Scheme participants.

## Bonded Medical Program information

The Department is developing an improved set of statutory Program material that is up to date, relevant and easily accessible for prospective participants, including medical students and legacy scheme participants.

A webinar to provide an update on progress for those not correctly bonded during 2020, will be run in coming weeks. Invitations will be sent out to affected individuals directly. Shortly thereafter, another webinar will be held for those that expressed an interest to opt in up to 16 March 2021 (i.e. when affected individuals were notified of the implementation issues).

A range of resources are under development including revised Frequently Asked Questions, information booklets for prospective medical students and doctors seeking to opt in from legacy schemes. A series of webinars about the Program are also being developed.

The Department is working with stakeholders to develop these resources and will make them available on the Department's website. For example, the Department is working with student representatives to develop the information booklets for prospective medical students. This acknowledges the important role that stakeholder organisations play in representing the interests of medical students who might be interested in participating in the Program, and to ensure materials adequately explain the Program, including the requirement for bonded participants to work in rural and remote Australia in order to complete the RoSO.

In addition to the booklets and webinars, the Department will continue to provide monthly Program updates on its [website](#).

## More flexibility for Bonded Participants, including those from legacy schemes

As noted in previous updates, legislative amendments that will provide additional flexibility to administer the Program are being prepared. The proposed amendments will allow:

- a person, in the event of serious disability or death, to cease to be a Bonded Participant without penalty;
- for some Bonded Participants, in limited circumstances, to apply for more time to complete the RoSO;
- for some inadvertent and/or minor breaches under the Program (and legacy schemes) to be more appropriately managed.

This additional flexibility will enhance participation in the Program.

## Enquiry response times

The Department acknowledges participant concerns regarding delays to email requests.

We receive a high volume of emails each week from participants across four mailboxes, so we are implementing measures to improve administration and reduce processing delays.

We will soon be moving to one mailbox for all Bonded Program enquiries and we will be seeking your cooperation to provide identifying information in the 'subject' of your email requests. We are also investigating how we might best use standardised web-based forms. Further information will be provided on these measures shortly.