

Understanding the financial implications of entering general practice training for junior doctors in South Australia- Executive Summary

Context

General Practitioners (GPs) provide a key role in Australian healthcare and are expected to well into the future. The supply of GPs is of concern, however nationwide, and in South Australia, there has been a decline in interest in GP training. While this decline is likely not attributed to a single factor, one factor regularly proposed to negatively impact interest in General Practice as a career is the difference in employment arrangements between hospital-based junior doctors and GP registrars in community practice.

Aims and Objectives

This primary purpose of this project was to explore the evidence regarding employment differences for doctors choosing to enter GP training, with a focus on the Australian General Practice Training (AGPT) pathway. Secondly, we sought to explore the GP earning potential using existing data and research compared with other specialties. This project was designed to inform advocacy, communication, and local quality improvement.

Method

Phase 1: Environmental Scan, literature review and analysis of existing data

An environmental scan was undertaken and involved reviewing relevant literature, policies, documents, data, and interviews with key informants. This scan then informed our survey in Phase 2.

Phase 2: GP Registrar survey and analysis

A survey was drafted, piloted, and implemented for GPEX Hospital-based and community-based registrars to gain insight to income, benefits and entitlements during these periods of training as well as registrar perspectives on employment packages and priorities. With a limited number of participants who engaged with the survey (n=34), an additional analysis was performed using the Medicine in Australia: Balancing Employment and Life (MABEL) data set. In this, we analysed participants from 2018 in GP and other specialties both during and post vocational training to explore age and career paths impacts on earnings.

Phase 3: Synthesis, comparisons and reporting

In this we drew from Phase 1 and both parts of Phase 2 to draw comparisons and conclusions regarding salary, benefits and entitlements for registrars in GP training and beyond.

Summary of Results

- Comparisons between base and minimum salaries for hospital and community registrars can be misleading:
 - Most hospital-based GP registrars earned above the base salary stipulated by the South Australian Salaried Medical Officers Agreement (SASMOA), an enterprise agreement.
 - Most community-based GP registrars earned above the National Terms and Conditions for the Employment of Registrars (NTCER) suggested minimum base salary.

- There is extremely large variation in the gross earnings of GP registrars compared with non-GP registrars.
- Comparisons between entitlements and benefits are difficult as they are complex:
 - Hospital-based registrars are entitled to additional supports such as professional development, relocation, as well as maintaining access to accrued annual and personal leave, and are eligible for paid parental leave.
 - Community-based registrars are generally on 6-month contracts, with leave resetting with each placement and few additional benefits for urban registrars. Rural registrars may be eligible for additional support through federal grants, GPEx, and the RDWA.
- Registrars, both hospital and community-based indicate that increasing base salary and percentage of billings are the most important factors for them. Increasing billings is seen as more important by GP community-based registrars.
- Hospital-based registrars are concerned about entering GP from a financial perspective and are preparing for the transition.
- Hospital-based registrars were uncertain regarding what they could earn within general practice and how Medicare billings might influence their pay.
- Community-based registrars indicated an opportunity for increased training and support navigating Medicare billing efficiently and effectively.
- There seems to be a general lack of awareness of benefits and entitlements available to registrars.
- In lifetime earnings, the MABEL data suggested there is a small difference between GP registrars and other specialty registrars during vocational training, but that post-Fellowship, the gap widens significantly after adjusting for age and gender. During training a difference was not observed between males and females, but post-fellowship, males tended to out earn females in general practice and other specialties.

Key Messages and Opportunities

Registrar's understanding of salary, benefits and entitlements was variable, suggesting the presence of knowledge gaps. This project has provided some key insights and opportunities for quality improvement including:

- Communication and education around the shortcomings of comparing base and minimum salaries in hospital and community-based training.
- Creating tools for navigating the diverse sources of additional funding available for rural registrars to promote rural and remote placements. This could include outlining the types, requirements, and process of claiming the benefits available. For GPEx this could include:
 - Inclusion of advice and support to access relevant benefits and entitlements through the GPEx training plan template and process. This would enable information and support to be given relevant to the individual's circumstances and plans in GP training.
 - Production of a registrar resource synthesising benefits and entitlements.
 - Support registrars prior to entering the GP community placements, and potential future GPs at earlier stages in the career pipeline to better understand how pay is calculated and what a salary range could look like.
 - Provision of further training and support on the business of general practice and how that impacts registrar's experience.
- Increase Medicare billing training and support, especially initially in AGPT training. This may include additional modules and training for registrars, and support and resources for practices.
- Continue advocacy for GP registrar and GP salary packages.
- Continue advocacy for transfer of leave and access to parental and study leave for registrars.