



## **AMACDT and medical college trainee representatives discuss college processes to support resolution of issues related to training**

The third AMA Trainee Forum of the year was held on 24 August 2023. AMA Council of Doctors in Training (CDT) Deputy Co-Chair, Dr Elise Buisson, facilitated a discussion on *college processes to support resolution of issues related to training* with trainee representatives and trainee chairs from specialist medical colleges and the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association attending.

### **Reflections and Discussion**

The experience of trainees seeking a resolution to training related issues were highlighted and shared amongst members. Dedicated support, reliable feedback, transparency of college processes, confidentiality during complaints procedures, flexibility across examination and assessment periods, improved data accessibility for ease of communication, and reduction of financial barriers to appeals were some of the key themes raised throughout the forum.

Given medical colleges play an essential role in the education and training of Australia's medical professionals, they have a duty to ensure that trainees who face issues throughout the training can access a fair and equitable resolution process and progress through training in a well-supported and timely manner.

### **Feedback and transparency during resolution processes**

Given the enormous financial, personal, and temporal investment required throughout specialist training, trainees can understandably experience very high levels of stress in the case they fail an exam or face a training issue. Trainee committee chairs noted disparity between college processes to support and provide feedback to trainees throughout the issue/dispute resolution process. While some colleges offered tailored support through education offices, supervisors and trainee committees, others lacked any dedicated support facilities. Similarly, some colleges offer individualised feedback if a student fails their examination, while others offered none, or offered poor pathways to accessing relevant information to assist in the process.

Trainee committee chairs also raised variability and ambiguity in the timeliness of dispute resolution processes. All trainees are heavily invested in their success throughout the specialist training programme, and unclear timeframes for dispute resolution can cause increased stress, doubt, frustration, which impacts trainee wellbeing. Disparities also exist around trainee participation in the dispute resolution process. In some cases, trainee committee members play an important role in the process, while others are excluded from the process.

Consistency and transparency regarding timeframes and college processes during dispute resolution processes, as well as accessible and effective support for trainees, should be a central goal of all specialist training colleges to support trainee wellbeing.

### **Financial barriers to dispute resolution**

Examinations are an incredibly expensive component of the specialist training program, requiring trainees to invest their time and money into the assessment process. Most colleges implement a three-stage process of reconsideration, review, and appeals. For some colleges, the first two stages are free, and costs for all stages are partially or fully reimbursed if a candidate is successful in their challenge. However, some colleges do not offer any form of reimbursement. For most colleges, the final appeal stage is prohibitively expensive, costing up to \$10,000 for the entire process. While all trainee representatives acknowledged that appeals processes do come at a cost to the college, the sheer scale of appeal fees was regarded as a potential barrier to fair process for some students.

### **Student accessibility for purposes of feedback and support**

Some trainee committee chairs noted their frustration at lack of access to the contact details of trainees within the college. While sensibilities around personal data were acknowledged, the benefits of trainee committee chairs having a secure, yet accessible source to contact trainees would provide much greater capacity for student-led support networks and tangible feedback around college processes, including resolution of training issues. Some trainee committees have implemented compulsory surveys as part of the fees process, providing a useful database of contact details to be utilised as part of feedback and support processes.

### **Flexibility throughout dispute resolution processes**

Some attendees raised concerns around the harsh, rigid nature of colleges response to training issues. Often, colleges implement a strict number of fail allowances before trainees are no longer allowed to complete the course. Given fail rates are not insignificant, this exacerbates the stress and pressure on trainees facing examination and assessment. It was also noted that colleges often implement strict timeframes for appeal and/or submission of relevant information, a problem made worse in cases where the processes and procedures for appeal are not presented in an accessible, transparent manner.

### **Examples of positive initiatives implemented by colleges:**

- Trainee participation in dispute resolution processes
- Reasonable access to student contact information
- Reimbursement of fees for successful appeals
- Mid-term notification of poor trainee performance
- Education and support processes for trainees experiencing issues
- Dedicated supervisors and 'sensors' for trainees
- Transparent and accessible information for trainees
- Practical and comprehensive policies and procedures
- Receptive approach to trainee feedback

- Trainee participation in site-accreditation and dispute resolution processes

**Areas for colleges to improve:**

- Transparency around resolution processes
- Timeliness of resolution processes
- Exam support
- Timely and high-quality exam feedback
- Education and accessibility of college policies
- College-led oversight of trainee communication
- Costs of review and appeals
- Stringent exam attempt restrictions
- Anonymity during complaints processes
- Mentoring networks or programs
- Confidentiality when training issues arise

**The following Medical College Trainee Committee Chairs/ Representatives attended the Forum:**

Attendees:

- Australian Medical Association Council of Doctors in Training
- Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists
- Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association
- Royal Australasian College of Physicians
- Australasian College for Emergency Medicine
- Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
- Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine
- Royal Australasian College of Surgeons
- Royal Australasian College of Medical Administrators
- Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia
- Australasian College of Sport and Exercise Physicians

Apologies:

- Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists
- Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists
- Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists
- Australasian College for Dermatologists
- College of Intensive Care Medicine
- Royal Australasian College of Dental Surgeons
- Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists

**Previous AMA Trainee Forum communiques:**

- [COVID-19 and its Impact on Specialty Training 1 June 2020](#)
- [Examination Processes 11 Aug 2020](#)
- [Contingency Planning for Exam Technical Failures 19 October 2020](#)
- [Best Practice in Trainee Representation, Engagement and Communication 28 Jan 2021](#)
- [College Assessment April 2021](#)
- [Costs of Training July 2021](#)
- [Processes for selection into training 26 October 2021](#)
- [Training through the pandemic—lessons learnt and the way forward in 2022 7 February 2022](#)
- [Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Trainees Progress Through Training to Fellowship 28 April 2022](#)
- [AMACDT and Medical College Trainee Representatives discuss College Initiatives to Support Flexible Training February 2023](#)
- [AMA Trainee Forum on College Initiatives to Support Women in Healthcare Leadership May 2023](#)

The AMACDT Trainee Forum is designed to increase collaboration between Specialist Medical College Trainee Committees and enhance cross specialty communication. If you have any feedback or questions, please contact us at [cdt.chair@ama.com.au](mailto:cdt.chair@ama.com.au)

The AMACDT, chaired by Dr Hannah Szewczyk, represents medical trainees throughout Australia and advocates for equitable and safe outcomes for trainees and their patients.