



Australian Medical Students' Association Ltd

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Senator The Honourable Kay Patterson
Minister for Health and Ageing
Suite MG 48
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

May 18, 2003

Dear Senator Patterson,

The Australian Medical Students Association (AMSA) represents all medical students in Australia. I am pleased to provide you with our official response to ***A Fairer Medicare – Better Access, More Affordable***, and specifically the component that relates directly to medical student numbers.

AMSA is deeply committed to addressing issues that effect medical students and the wider medical workforce. We agree with the government that the medical workforce shortage – particularly in rural areas – is a major problem facing the healthcare system in Australia. Increasing medical school numbers is a necessary part of the solution to this problem. *But bonding medical students to rural service should not form any part of this solution and AMSA categorically opposes this part of the government's new initiative.*

Despite the government's good intentions, AMSA believes that the strict nature of this scheme, the timing of the placement and the length of the bonds all detract from making this a workable and effective initiative. Every medical student society in Australia shares our concerns about the ineffectiveness of this unfair, inequitable and draconian scheme and stands united on this issue.

AMSA is delighted that the government has provided funding for extra medical school places, but we believe that positive schemes with adequate incentives can be found as an alternative to bonding medical students into restrictive and unfair schemes. Such alternatives would relieve the stress and anxiety felt by student involved in this scheme and lead to better outcomes for them and for the communities they serve.

This policy cannot be assessed in isolation from other Government initiatives. The extra stresses that will be felt by all students as a result of the recommendations of the Nelson Report into higher education will be considerable. The option of studying medicine has never been less appealing to students. In an environment where communities from all walks of life are suffering from doctor shortages, it is surprising and concerning that the Government would pursue such an option.

AMSA has a strong tradition of encouraging medical students to consider rural service and we have policies that urge medical schools to provide a significant amount of positive exposure to rural areas for its students. This way students will have the



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opportunity to experience life as a doctor outside a metropolitan area, and be able to make a voluntary choice about where they would like to live and practise. Any scheme that relies on an element of compulsion or bonding, without adequate incentive, will always fall short of its intended purpose.

I would also like to express our disappointment that AMSA, the peak medical student association nationwide, was not consulted during the formation of this package nor asked for any formal feedback. It is only through consultation with interest groups, such as the AMA and AMSA, that the Department of Health and Ageing can ensure that their efforts to improve healthcare in Australia results in the formation of workable and effective policies. We politely request a meeting with either yourself or a member of your staff to discuss these policies which we believe could have an unwanted negative impact on the future of healthcare in this country.

AMSA remains eager to work with the department to help meet its responsibilities to the Australian public in establishing the best healthcare policies possible. I repeat, that AMSA believes the current initiatives will be ineffective. Finding workable solutions to the problems facing medical students and the medical workforce are critical if the future of the healthcare system is to be ensured. AMSA hopes to play a positive role in this process.

I look forward to making contact with you in the future.

Kind regards,

Nick Brown
President
Australian Medical Students Association

CC: The Prime Minister – The Hon John Howard, MP
Leader of the Opposition – The Hon Simon Crean, MP
Minister for Education, Science and Training – The Hon Dr Brendan Nelson, MP
Shadow Minister for Health and Aging – Mr Stephen Smith, MP
Deputy Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Minister for Employment, Education,
Training and Science – Ms. Jenny Macklin, MP
All Australian Senators