Project China – The Future for the College

Become involved in cross continental exchange

Dr Cousins has seen first-hand the existing disparities across Chinese medical services. Big hospitals, he says, are well equipped and generally need international involvement only for teaching initiatives and training, whereas small hospitals may have very limited facilities, and only basic ongoing training. Senior staff in Chinese hospitals are travelling more frequently than ever before, however, middle and lower-ranked staff are not often provided the opportunity. An expanded exchange program would be an excellent avenue for young surgeons to access training, as well as providing valuable exposure to different surgical cultures. Working and learning in Australia also provides further exposure to English-language training and this will facilitate contact between Australasia and China in the future.

David Watson

Adelaide and China have been ‘exchanging’ surgeons and skills since 1998, when Professor Liu Junfeng received a scholarship enabling him to spend a year in Adelaide. Professor Liu is now Head of Thoracic Surgery at the 4th Hospital of the Hebei Medical University, and is an on-going supporter of Chinese and Australian surgical engagement. Many connections were formed on this initial visit and Professor Watson’s own trips began in 2004 with a visit to Tianjin, China’s fourth largest city, with a population of around 12 million. The Head of Thoracic Surgery at the Tianjin Chest Hospital, Zhang Xun, who is now Vice-President of the Chinese Cardiac and Thoracic Surgery Society, visited Flinders University in the early 2000s.

Professor Watson reports that about 12 Chinese surgeons have now visited South Australia, each for around a year’s duration, and he made six visits to China between 2004 and 2009. From July 2011 to January 2012, Professor Watson spent his six months Sabbatical in China.

Visiting Chinese surgeons do not, with a few exceptions, have an adequate command of English to be registered for clinical practice in Australia. Instead, they have been facilitated to participate in research – an opportunity which is warmly welcomed.

“The want international engagement, and writing English-language research papers is really important exposure for them,” Professor Watson reports. “Clinically they are as good if not better than we are in Australia. Their diagnostic equipment, for example, is better and their caseloads are huge. However, they have some way to go in research training, especially with issues around quality management.”

Professor Watson has been studying Mandarin for the past five years through evening courses in Australia, and more intensively while recently in China – enough to survive! He reports that many older surgeons in China have limited English language skills. However, new graduates and students are often quite fluent and, most importantly, keen to learn. Communication issues shouldn’t, therefore, serve as a disincentive to anyone wishing to visit China.