

“As these Trainees complete their Family Medicine training, it seems a natural step that some of them will wish to go onto Postgraduate training and when they are ready, we’ll be ready”



Professor Doutor Aurélio Guterres - Rector UNTL, Associate Professor Glenn Guest - ATLAS II Project Director, Professor Michael Grigg - RACS President, Dr Antony Chenhall - ATLAS II Team Leader and Emergency Physician, Dr Joao Martins, Dean, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, UNTL.

# BUILDING HEALTH IN TIMOR-LESTE

## New health diplomas see health professionals flourish

The College received a signal honour last year when the President, Professor Michael Grigg, was asked to deliver the keynote speech at the formal graduation ceremony of the first East Timorese Trainees to gain locally-delivered Post Graduate (PG) Diplomas in the health sciences.

The ceremony, held in Dili in November, recognised the achievements of students across a range of disciplines including nine Timorese doctors who completed PG diplomas in Surgery, Anaesthesia and Paediatrics.

The PG Diplomas were jointly delivered by the College, the Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosae (UNTL) and the Timor-Leste Ministry of Health (MoH) with support from the Australian Government-funded Australia Timor-Leste Program for Assistance in Secondary Services (ATLASS) Phase II.

Since gaining independence in 2002, East Timor has been progressively building its health system with the help of many nations. Australia has been a major

contributor with the College playing a pivotal role since 2001 by developing programs to train medical staff both in and out of the country.

Cuba has also made a significant contribution in undergraduate training and the medical workforce has grown from a mere 20 doctors in 2001 to reach almost 1000 in 2015.

Going in at the request of the Timorese and the Australian Governments, the College first aimed to meet urgent service delivery needs before shifting its focus to education, training and the creation of a self-sustaining specialist PG education system.

Now, the ATLASS program includes eight staff at the national hospital in Dili including a Surgeon, Anaesthetist, Obstetrician and Gynaecologist, Paediatrician, Emergency Physician and program support staff. In addition, the College employs an ophthalmologist through the East Timor Eye Program (ETEP).

From 2012, the ATLASS program supported the development and delivery of the PG diplomas, including introducing regular teaching activities at the hospital in Dili, establishing a PG Resource Centre where doctors can access online resources and textbooks, providing mentoring and supporting the establishment of a PG diploma governance committee.

The PG diploma graduates are now able to build on these efforts by teaching and supervising junior doctors which in turn will help establish the national hospital as a teaching hospital.

The three Surgery graduates and three Paediatrics graduates are now actively involved in co-supervising and teaching doctors enrolled in the newly implemented Family Medicine Program (FMP) while the PG diploma graduates in Anaesthesia are now undertaking further postgraduate training in Fiji and Indonesia.

### New skills and improved education

The Program Director of ATLAS II, Associate Professor Glenn Guest, said the graduation of the nine doctors was a wonderful achievement because it not only boosted the skills of the local medical workforce, but also means that East Timor now has increased capacity to deliver postgraduate medical education.

He said that while the surgery graduates were not yet specialists, they had the skills to manage simple bone fractures, treat complex wounds and identify critically ill patients in regional settings who required higher levels of care.

“The graduation of these doctors is a very significant achievement,” Mr Guest said.

“It is the first time that Postgraduate training in medicine has ever been undertaken within the country which we hope will form the platform to build further Postgraduate educational programs, including other specialty areas.

“In the past, all Postgraduate training has taken place outside East Timor – in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Fiji or PNG – which necessarily removed these doctors and their skills from the country for the duration of their training.

“The original idea to deliver Postgraduate training in East Timor was first discussed in the early years of the ATLASS program and it has taken a decade to bring that plan to fruition.

“Therefore, the graduation of these doctors is an achievement borne of 12 years of continuous College presence in East Timor which allowed all of us involved to understand local needs and priorities and create the relationships required to see it through.”

Mr Guest said that in addition to their roles as clinicians, the PG Diploma graduates had been trained

to teach the next generation of East Timorese medical students.

He said, however, that while there was a great deal of enthusiasm toward the Postgraduate program, it had been temporarily put on hold at the request of the MoH while attention is focused on the training needs of the hundreds of Cuban-trained junior doctors, many of whom will be based at the country’s Community Health Centres.

He said the ATLASS team would be providing these doctors with supplementary training under the Family Medicine Program following completion of their undergraduate training.

“As these Trainees complete their Family Medicine training, it seems a natural step that some of them will wish to go onto Postgraduate training and when they are ready, we’ll be ready,” he said.

“All of this work has been done to put in place the initial steps required to allow East Timor to become self-sustaining in the provision of its health and medical workforce.

“Yet, there are still only a small number of East Timorese specialists so the ability for East Timor to independently provide post graduate training to its own doctors could still be many years away.

“In the meantime, the RACS will continue to provide support, educational resources and mentorship.”

### Working hand-in-hand

Mr Guest said it was a great honour that the Rector of the UNTL, Professor Aurelio Guterres, invited the RACS President to deliver the inaugural oration of the Postgraduate ceremony.

“Given how many countries have helped East Timor to rebuild, for the College to be given this honour indicates, I believe, how highly our work is regarded there.”

College President Professor Grigg said it had been a privilege to speak at the ceremony which was attended by a number of Embassy representatives from the countries now assisting in East Timor.

He said the long-term commitment by the College to the people and doctors in East Timor had been one based on philanthropy rather than charity.

“We have always been focussed on training one way or another which is a philanthropic endeavour because our aim has always been to assist our colleagues in East Timor to create a self-sufficient and self-sustaining medical workforce,” he said.

“It was quite an honour to receive the invitation to speak, yet while I was there I had a number of meetings with representatives from the Ministry of Health, University and Hospital all of which made clear how highly the College is regarded there.”