Sydney Vascular Surgeon and academic Dr Sarah Aitken has been selected to become the inaugural recipient of the College’s Senior Lecturer Fellowship to begin next year.

A n initiative developed by the College Research, Audit and Academic Surgery (RAAS) Board, the Fellowship has been designed and introduced to provide recipients with salary support and in so doing help increase the overall number of Academic Surgery positions in tertiary institutions across Australia and New Zealand.

With monies provided through the Foundation for Surgery, the Fellowship is valued at $132,000 per annum for up to three years with the College providing $66,000 and the recipient’s institution expected to provide the equivalent amount.

The Fellowship is open to all Fellows of the College from all specialties, but is particularly aimed at younger surgeons wishing to embark on, or consolidate a career as an Academic Surgeon.

Chair of the RAAS Board, Associate Professor Ian Bennett said the Fellowship initiative had been designed in close collaboration with the College’s Section of Academic Surgery and had won warm support from the College Council last year.

He said it was hoped that the seed funding for each Fellowship position would help encourage institutions to provide on-going support for the academic posts.

“The over-all number of funded Academic Surgery positions has been declining in recent years because of the tight budgetary environment affecting educational institutions in Australia and New Zealand and we are trying to turn that around,” Professor Bennett said.

“We know that a number of young surgeons would like to pursue a career as an Academic Surgeon, but become disheartened by the difficulty in securing an institutional position with a guaranteed income stream.

“Therefore, we have particularly designed this Fellowship to support surgeons at the beginning of their academic career where future funding is often insecure.

“In recent years the number of academic posts in medicine and surgery has fallen in both Australia and New Zealand because of limited resources and we hope this College funding will act as a catalyst towards redeveloping this vital component of the medical and surgical professions.

“The College supports this Fellowship not only as a way to give back to our Fellows by providing this new career pathway, but also to provide medical undergraduates and post-graduate surgeons with access to highly-experienced and talented teachers.”

Dr Aitken has a clinical practice based at the Concord Clinical School, a teaching position through the University of Sydney at the Concord Clinical School and conducts research through the Concord Centre for Education and Research in Ageing.

She said that while she was initially appointed to her teaching role to boost anatomy education, she was now working with undergraduates, post graduates and hospital residents.

She is also undertaking a PhD into the outcomes and epidemiology of older people having vascular surgery in NSW.

With her part-time vascular practice, Dr Aitken described the three strands of her surgical career as an “exciting mix”.

“Each aspect of my working life informs the others and that is a joy,” she said.

“While I was initially brought in to teach surgical anatomy, my role soon broadened so now I work with students on problem-based learning and developing clinical and surgical skills.

“We also have a virtual anatomy table – it’s like a giant iPad and one of only a few in Australia. The students love it because it helps fill any gaps of knowledge they might have and therefore boosts their confidence.

“Often, it is the students who decide what they want to learn and, while I am no anatomist, I facilitate that learning, act as a mentor and involve other teachers.”

Impact on elderly

Dr Aitken is completing her PhD under the supervision of a geriatrician and epidemiologist through the Concord Centre for Education and Research in Ageing and the University of Sydney.

She said she was investigating the outcomes of vascular surgery on older patients because little was known about the longer-term impact of such surgery on the elderly.

As part of her research, she is collecting and analysing the data of all admissions by vascular patients aged over 70 years in all public and private hospitals in NSW, all Emergency Department admissions for the same cohort and collating death statistics through the office of Births, Deaths and Marriages.

“Concord Hospital has a focus on older patients and geriatrics and we see many vascular cases and conduct a number of procedures such as angiograms or vascular by-pass surgery,” Dr Aitken said.

“However, not a great deal is known about the impact of such surgical interventions in terms of the possible acceleration of decline or frailty.”
“Do these patients become more frail? Do they end up in a nursing home earlier than otherwise? Is age alone the determinant in decline or does the intervention itself have a role to play? “This analysis of quality of life issues is a very exciting, emerging field of research because while it is complex and statistics-based, it has direct relevance to our patients.”

“We want to know what might happen in the future and while we can offer reassurance, that should not be based on conjecture, but solid information.”

“The data we collect could even point us toward a new model of shared care where geriatricians and allied health professionals become part of the post-surgery treatment plan.”

Dr Aitken was one of 11 applicants for the Senior Lecturer Fellowship and with only a one-year tenure provided for her current teaching position, said she was delighted to have been chosen.

She said she felt both humbled and grateful for the honour of becoming the inaugural recipient.

“A career in Academic Surgery has not been so popular in recent years for younger doctors because it is poorly remunerated, insecure and difficult to find supported positions,” she said.

“And it’s incredibly rewarding not just personally, but in terms of allowing Australian and New Zealand surgeons to contribute to world-wide research and progress.”

“Wearing my different hats also creates interactions that are hugely enriching, I learn from my teaching while my research changes the way I think as a vascular surgeon.”

“I also appreciate the ability to give back to younger doctors and surgeons the support and mentoring I received as a young doctor.”

“I am also particularly mindful and grateful that the College chose a woman to receive the first Fellowship. It means that I can tell my young female students that they can pursue both a career in surgery and a career as an academic surgeon and there will be the support there for them.”

Dr Aitken will take up her Senior Lecturer Fellowship in January next year.

With Karen Murphy