



ROYAL AUSTRALASIAN COLLEGE OF SURGEONS

MEDIA RELEASE

Census reveals looming challenge to health systems

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The latest census of the Australian and New Zealand surgical workforce has revealed a looming challenge to health systems across both countries, with nearly a quarter of surgeons intending to retire from public on-call work within the next five years.

The President of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, Mr Ian Civil, said that this will put a huge strain on those surgeons left in the system. “While the pressure will be felt more in some specialties than others, governments and the College need to work together to address this problem before it becomes a crisis,” he said.

The College’s 2009 census of Fellows paints a picture of a profession undergoing change while preserving the traditional model of surgical care. An important part of this traditional model is a commitment to the public sector. “Across all specialties there is a significant number of Fellows devoting a proportion of their working week to consulting and procedural work in our public hospitals,” Mr Civil said.

“I note also that more than half of our Fellows devote time to teaching and training, much of it pro bono. This is crucial to the ongoing viability of health systems on both sides of the Tasman.”

Other findings of note include an overall increase in the number of Fellows participating in surgical practice between 2005 and 2009 and the fact that, on a yearly average, one female now enters surgical practice for every 3.6 males.

“While the feminisation of the surgical workforce is to be welcomed, evidence suggests that this creates new challenges – female surgeons’ work/life balance is different from that of the previous, and largely male, generation of surgeons,” Mr Civil said.

“The drift towards subspecialisation is another complicating factor. As surgeons narrow their scope of practice, health systems are having to cope with a declining number of generalists within a given specialty.”

Despite the increase in surgeon numbers, more than a third of Fellows found the level of on-call work in the public sector to be heavy or extremely heavy. In particular, 57.8 per cent of Paediatric, 47.0 per cent of Cardiothoracic and 45.0 per cent of Vascular Surgeons found the level of on-call public sector work heavy or extremely heavy.

Mr Civil called for greater investment in hospital based training posts. “The College is ready to train more surgeons, but these Trainees need a place to work and learn. The College also renews its call for training posts in the private sector. Well over half of all surgery is done in the private sector, but only about five per cent of training is done there. This represents a wasted opportunity,” Mr Civil said.

The College's census of the surgical workforce addresses key issues of current and future work practices, in both the public and private sectors. Providing a comprehensive picture of the surgical workforce, the census offers findings across the nine surgical specialties and across the Australian states and New Zealand.

The census is available at www.surgeons.org

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