

Bonded medical schemes: what do students think?

Background

Since their inception, debate has surrounded the utility and fairness of the Bonded Medical Place (BMP) and Medical Rural Bonded Scholarship (MRBS) schemes. These schemes provide a Commonwealth Supported Place to study medicine, with or without a monetary scholarship, in exchange for a 'return of service' obligation to be completed in an RA2-5 area or district of workforce shortage after completing specialist training. A recent independent review recommended the abolition of at least one of these schemes with funding redirected towards scholarships for students of allied health professions. Much of the debate to date has been anecdotal and based on limited data.

Aims

The aim of this research was to obtain the views of BMP students, MRBS students, non-bonded medical students and non-medical health students towards the BMP and MRBS schemes.

Research questions included:

- ▶ Do health students support or oppose bonded schemes as a mechanism to address rural workforce shortages?
- ▶ How does the level of support vary between bonded and non-bonded medical students and between BMP and MRBS students?
- ▶ Do health students support the broadening of the schemes to non-medical health students?

Method

Over 9,000 members of the National Rural Health Student Network (NRHSN) enrolled at 28 Australian universities were invited via email to participate in an anonymous online survey. Participants included BMP students, MRBS students, non-bonded medical students and non-medical health students.

Results

920 responses were received, comprising:

- ▶ 307 bonded medical students
- ▶ 316 non-bonded medical students
- ▶ 267 non-medicine (nursing and allied health) students.

66% of respondents were in favour of the BMP and MRBS schemes as a means of addressing rural health workforce shortages, with a further 21% having neutral views. There was no significant difference in support between bonded and non-bonded medical students ($p=0.468$).

Amongst bonded medical students, those studying under the BMP scheme were significantly more likely to be opposed to the schemes than students studying under the MRBS scheme (27% versus 6%; $p=0.004$).

Opposition to the schemes amongst bonded students increased with increasing year of study (odds ratio 1.33; $p=0.012$).

Of bonded medical students, 81% indicated that they were likely or very likely to complete their return of service obligations, with a further 10% being undecided. 72% of non-medical health students were in favour of similar schemes for non-medical health disciplines, with a further 27.5% being undecided.

Conclusion

Amongst NRHSN members, there is overall broad support for bonded medical schemes as a means of addressing workforce shortages. The majority of bonded medical students intend to complete their return of service obligations. Members of the NRHSN express strong support for similar schemes in non-medical health disciplines.