

Improving the working lives of doctors

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The Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research will today launch a major new longitudinal survey of doctors in Australia. The survey aims to collect rich information about the preferences and views of doctors. The survey is funded by the NHMRC and is being conducted by researchers at the University of Melbourne and Monash University.

According to Professor Anthony Scott from the Melbourne Institute "The current health workforce 'crisis' is likely to get worse before it gets better. Over 50% medical graduates are women, the generation of 'baby boomers' is approaching retirement, and many young doctors don't want to run a business they just want to be a doctor. Remote and rural areas are likely to be affected the most by these changes. Unfortunately, simply training more doctors will not be enough to fix the current crisis. More action is needed. However, there is very little research evidence that indicates what works and what doesn't in designing policies to support the medical workforce. What factors influence doctors' morale and motivation? How does morale and motivation influence doctors' work-life balance, and the balance between direct patient care and other aspects of medical jobs. Do younger and older doctors have different views about the structure of medical careers and the practise of medicine? How are these issues changing over time? How can medical career structures be re-designed to be more flexible and meet doctors' needs?"

Medical workforce data at the moment are not fit for purpose and cannot answer these important questions. Medical workforce policy remains an 'evidence free' zone. Current data collections are designed to count the size and location of the medical workforce, but that is all. They are not designed to capture the preferences or views of doctors that can then be fed into policy development, nor do current data collections enable us to understand why changes are happening or how they influence quality and access to care. Such information is vital in developing effective policies to support the medical workforce.

The Medicine in Australia: Balancing Employment and Life or MABEL survey has been endorsed by medical specialist colleges, societies and training providers (see <http://www.mabel.org.au>) and has a Policy Reference Group which is providing advice about medical workforce policy issues that will inform the collection and analysis of data and ensure that MABEL is not just an academic exercise but will make a real difference to doctors' working lives. The information provided by doctors will be used to; i) improve doctors' morale and work satisfaction, thus leading to improved patient care; ii) improve the population's access to medical services, and; iii) improve the evidence base of medical workforce policy. "The longitudinal nature of the survey enables us to examine how circumstances change over time, and what effect these changes are having on the working and family lives of doctors".

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