

# English test stymies doctors

Practising doctors hit registration wall.



**DOCTOR NO:** Registration requirements under fire

**F**oreign-trained doctors living in Australia have voiced their anger and frustration at being unable to work because they are failing mandatory English tests which they claim are unfair, expensive and unnecessary.

The doctors' criticisms were aired to a parliamentary inquiry investigating the registration processes overseas medical graduates are required to complete before they can practise in Australia.

The registration processes are under scrutiny amid complaints they are onerous, expensive and a bureaucratic minefield.

Dr Michael Galak, from the former USSR, has been practising in Australia since 1981.

But he told a public hearing in Melbourne that his registration has now lapsed because under new rules he was required to sit several exams, including an English test, which he subsequently failed by half a point.

Dr Galak said the system was "chaotic" and "ad hoc". "It shifts the goal posts all the time," he said.

"My contention here is that when medical boards, the AMA included, tell us about the quality of service, about safety of patients and the consistency of assessment, the question which I have to [ask] is ... how come I was allowed to work for more than a quarter of a century as a doctor and be continuously registered?"

Dr Susan Douglas of the Overseas Trained Doctors Association told a public hearing in Canberra many doctors have complained to her that the English tests are unfair.

She said she knows of a GP who has been working in rural Australia for 10 years but is now no longer registered because she cannot meet new standards imposed.

"So this community is being denied a doctor because probably her grammar is not very good," she said.

*Continued page 10*

## LATEST

### WARNING FOR BILLBOARD ADVERTISERS

Billboard advertisers have been told by a parliamentary inquiry to toughen up their self-regulatory rules and better enforce them or face the prospect of government intervention.

The House of Representatives Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee has handed down its report into the regulation of billboard and outdoor advertising.

The inquiry was prompted by several controversial billboard campaigns in recent years such as those marketing sex performance products.

The report has made 19 recommendations aimed at strengthening the rules which govern what content can be shown in outdoor advertising campaigns.

"It cannot be turned off or put away if a consumer wishes to ignore it," committee chair Graham Perrett (Moreton, Qld) said.

While stopping short of calling for complete government regulation, the inquiry has recommended various changes to the industry's self-regulating system, including a separate code of practice for outdoor ads.

And it says if sufficient change has not been made by 2013 that a "co-regulatory" system be implemented.

Advertising and industry bodies have until the end of this year to tell the Attorney-General's Department how they will implement the inquiry's recommendations.

By the end of 2012 they must again report to show what changes they have made.

The Advertising Standards Bureau is considering its response. ●

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## NEWS

THINKSTOCK



## CAMPAIGN FUNDING INVESTIGATED

Australia's system of election campaign funding is being reviewed by federal parliament's Electoral Matters Committee. The public inquiry is canvassing ways to improve the system for funding political parties and campaigns, focusing on transparency and accountability, the role of third parties and how to limit the escalating cost of elections.

"Our goal is for a political funding system that is fair and transparent; one that we can all have confidence in," committee chair Daryl Melham (Banks, NSW) said.

Since 1984, when the current federal election funding and financial disclosure regime was introduced, public funding for political parties has jumped 162 per cent, costing \$49 million for the 2007 election.

And that \$49 million only represents around 20 per cent of the amount major parties spend on campaigns per election.

Twenty per cent of funds come from donations (which only need to be disclosed if they exceed \$11,900) and 60 per cent come from other sources such as membership fees and party investments which do not require transparent disclosure.

The inquiry comes after three years of stalled attempts to legislate changes to the campaign finance system. Measures to increase the transparency of political donations and funding of elections, which include lowering the donation disclosure threshold and prohibiting foreign donations, failed to pass the Senate in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

Campaign finance reform was one of the proposals included in the agreement between the independent MPs and Labor to form government following last year's election. •

### LINKS

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*Continued from page 9*

"I think from a government point of view that is unacceptable. That has to be fixed."

Nasir Baig, from Pakistan, said he originally passed English tests in 2004 but it took him until 2007 to complete the rest of the exams required for registration.

He was then told he had to sit the English exams again because his first test was more than two years old and during that time he was not practising.

During the past four years he has re-sat the test over 19 times but cannot meet the requirement of obtaining a 'B' score in all four sections at the same time.

"I have financed thousands of dollars to complete all these steps. It is a very sad story," he said.

Since 2005 all international medical graduates have been required by the Medical Board of Australia to meet a certain standard of English proficiency.

Two tests are used to do this – an occupational English test and the International English Language Testing System.

Dr Douglas told the inquiry she believes there is a lack of transparency surrounding the occupational English test and doctors have trouble getting feedback on where they failed.

"There seems to be no ability to judge how people are being marked," she said.

"I have heard from people who have failed multiple times but their scores are all over the place. From an educational perspective that really raises red flags."

Dr Joanna Flynn of the Medical Board of Australia said although the

board requires that the exams be sat, it is not responsible for administering them.

She told the inquiry out of 1,000 consecutive applications for limited registration there were only 12 for whom the English standard was a problem.

"For most people [the English test] is not a barrier in terms of getting registration in Australia," she said.

Dr Flynn said the rule that requires doctors to re-sit a test if two years have lapsed and they have not been working would be reviewed under normal procedures.

Dr Christopher Butt, a retired GP who has done some English teaching, said there was a "lot of disquiet" about the English assessments.

"In the last nine years since I have been teaching, the level of English required to satisfy the Australian Medical Council has significantly increased. In fact many doctors now think that passing the English test is harder than passing the medical tests," he said.

But Ivan Thompson of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons said his college believed that the test needed to be tough and should in fact be tougher.

"We would maintain that in fact at a specialist level it is not too hard, it is too easy. We are dealing with high stakes here," he said.

Around 40 per cent of doctors working in Australia are foreign-trained and many practise in regional areas which struggle to attract local doctors. •

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