

Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH AND AGEING PORTFOLIO

Budget Estimates 2012-2013, 30 & 31 May and 1 June 2012

Question: E12-041

OUTCOME 12: Health Workforce Capacity

Topic: English Tests and Immigrant Doctors

Type of Question: Written Question on Notice

Number of pages: 3

Senator: Senator Boyce

Question:

- a) In the last five years how many doctors wishing to practice in Australia have failed the English test?
- b) In the last five years how many times have changes been made to those English tests?
- c) Who actually conducts those tests? Who is responsible for them?
- d) Who made those changes and why?
- e) Why is the Medical Board of Australia (MBA) in control of these procedures when they have a clear conflict of interest as to their outcomes and which have nothing to do with their primary area of competence?
- f) Have the English tests applied by the Board been validated by any independent body with expertise in this area?
- g) These tests have repeatedly been described over many years as, unfair, expensive, unnecessary, onerous, adhoc, bureaucratic and subject to constant change?
- h) Are doctors who fail them told in detail as to why they failed?
- i) What procedures are in place to provide feedback?
- j) Are these testing procedures transparent?
- k) Does perfect English come before medical competence when assessing overseas doctors wanting to work in Australia?
- l) We are aware of at least two doctors, one who worked here for 25 years and another who worked in rural Australia for ten years who both lost their registration as it was

- decided their English was not up to scratch. How could such decisions possibly be reasonable, just or rational given the clear evidence of functional ability?
- m) While maintaining standards is clearly important why does doing that involve being so, according to years of evidence, unnecessarily unpleasant, bureaucratic and un-supportive of people with skills who want to become part of our nation?
 - n) Why does the Medical Board ignore its own dictums of transparency accountability and consistency of assessment when it deals with applications for registration from foreign trained doctors?

Answer:

- a) The Department of Health and Ageing does not hold data on how many practitioners have failed the English language standard tests. English language testing is carried out by private companies for requirements set by the Medical Board of Australia (MBA). The MBA may be able to assist.
- b) The Department is unable to answer this question. Any changes to the English language tests are the responsibility of the test providers.
- c) The MBA has stipulated that it accepts testing results for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Occupational English Test (OET), the New Zealand Registration Examination (NZRE) and the Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board of the General Medical Council of the United Kingdom (PLAB). The IELTS is jointly owned by the British Council, IELTS Australia and the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. The OET is administered by the Centre for Adult Education and designed by the Professor Tim McNamara of the University of Melbourne. The NZRE is administered by the New Zealand Medical Council. The PLAB (UK) is administered by the Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board of the General Medical Council of the United Kingdom.
- d) Refer to answer b).
- e) Under State and territory legislation establishing the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme all national boards are required to have an English language registration standard. The MBA is responsible for developing the standards for the medical profession. The MBA sets the English language skill level required but is not directly involved in the testing. The standard was subject to wide consultation in its development.
- f) The nominated tests are well-accepted and widely used tests of English language ability. Details of their development and validity may be available from the provider's website.
- g) The Department has no comment on this statement. Concerns about the tests should be directed to the provider or the MBA.
- h) Further information is available on the websites of the individual test providers.
- i) Refer to answer h).
- j) Questions regarding testing procedures should be directed to the provider.

- k) This question should be directed to the MBA. The English language standard is one of the five mandatory registration standards intended to ensure public safety.
- l) Decisions regarding registration of a medical practitioner are a matter for the MBA. Concerns about the application of the English language standard should be directed to the MBA.
- m) Concerns about standards or registration processes should be referred to the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency or the MBA.
- n) Concerns about standards or registration process should be referred to the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency or the MBA.