

RECEIVED
17 JAN 2006
BY: A114

Submission No. 102
Date Received 17-01-06

Australian Institute of Medical Scientists

PO Box 1911, Milton, Qld 4064

ABN 12 945 883 573 ANC 010 985 403

Tel: 61 7 3876 2988
Fax: 61 7 3876 2999

E-mail: aimsnat@aims.org.au
Website: www.aims.org.au



Parliament of Australia
House of Representatives Joint Standing Committee on Migration

**INQUIRY INTO SKILLS RECOGNITION, UPGRADING AND
LICENSING**

Submission by the Australian Institute of Medical Scientists

The Australian Institute of Medical Scientists thanks the House of Representatives Joint Standing Committee on Migration for the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry.

BACKGROUND

The Australian Institute of Medical Scientists (AIMS) is the professional association representing medical scientists working in hospitals, universities and private medical laboratories in Australia. Professional membership of the Association is restricted to qualified medical scientists. One of the benefits of membership of AIMS is that it is recognised by employers as indicating professional status.

AIMS is also the body to which the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (AEI-NOOSR) has delegated the authority to assess the skills and qualifications of those people who are applying to migrate to Australia under the Commonwealth's General Skilled Migration programme as medical scientists ASCO 2115-11 (professional classification) or medical laboratory technical officers ASCO 3111-11 (technical classification). AIMS carries out these assessments on behalf of NOOSR.

Medical scientists perform medical laboratory tests on blood and other body tissues to assist in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease.

Medical scientists work in hospital laboratories, private pathology laboratories, state health laboratories and universities. In larger hospitals and laboratories, medical scientists usually specialise in a specific discipline, such as immunology, cytology, haematology, microbiology or blood transfusion.

Training and qualifications

The academic training for medical scientists in Australia is a Bachelor of Science or Applied Science degree in which the majors include specialised medical science subjects. There are currently twelve bachelor degree courses in medical laboratory science conducted by universities in Australia and New Zealand that have been accredited by AIMS. These courses are assessed against AIMS Minimum Standards

for Professional Degree Courses in Medical Science by a team of specialist assessors; the accreditation is usually for a period of five years.

Graduates of AIMS accredited degree courses are eligible for professional membership of the Institute upon graduation, and to be classified as medical scientists. Graduates of other relevant science degrees, whether obtained in Australia or overseas, are assessed individually and normally require a minimum of two years' post graduate professional experience, in addition to a relevant degree equivalent to at least an Australian bachelor degree, **plus** successful completion of the AIMS professional examination, before they can be classified as a medical scientist.

Assessment process

The Australian Institute of Medical Scientists considers that its role in assessing the qualifications and skills of potential migrants is chiefly to maintain standards and to ensure that migrants who may gain entry as medical scientists have the qualifications and experience to work as medical scientists in the Australian health system. Maintaining the current high standards and ensuring patient welfare are paramount considerations.

AIMS conducts these assessments based initially on certified documentary evidence of qualifications and experience provided by the applicant, followed by a three hour written examination for eligible applicants. For applicants who have not completed an AIMS accredited degree programme, successful completion of the AIMS Professional Examination is mandatory for classification as a medical scientist. An applicant who fails the examination would be classified as a medical laboratory technical officer.

RESPONSE TO ISSUES UNDER CONSIDERATION BY THE INQUIRY

1. *Investigate and report on current arrangements for overseas skills recognition and associated issues of licensing and registration for:*

- *Skills stream migrants who obtain assessment prior to migrating*
- *Families of skill stream migrants, family stream migrants and humanitarian entrants who seek assessment/registration/upgrading after arrival*
- *Temporary residents who need skills assessment/recognition*
- *Australian citizens returning after significant time overseas, with overseas qualifications.*

The procedure by AIMS for assessing medical scientists and medical laboratory technical officers in the above categories is the same, whether the assessment is for migration or employment purposes.

Currently there is no statutory registration or licensing of medical scientists in Australia. AIMS has, for some years, made representations to government to have some form of statutory registration introduced. Some, but not all, employers require eligibility for professional membership of AIMS as a prerequisite for employment as a medical scientist.

Obviously a problem arises in the case of people who migrate or return to Australia other than in the General Skilled Migration programme and who seek employment as medical scientists. As there are no registration or licensing requirements for medical

scientists in Australia, people with sub-standard qualifications and inappropriate or no relevant experience may, and frequently do, find employment as medical scientists. Employment of poorly qualified scientists in pathology laboratories may compromise patient welfare and is a matter of concern to AIMS.

2. Consider how Australia's arrangements compare with those of other major immigration countries.

With regard to recognition of Australian medical scientist qualifications, most countries have some form of registration or license for medical scientists. In the United Kingdom Australian graduates are highly sought after and are recognised as highly skilled and highly trained. AIMS is currently holding discussions with the Institute of Biomedical Science (UK) with a view to facilitating the registration of Australian graduates in the UK.

In the United States of America, most States have some form of registration for medical scientists and require successful completion of an examination; anecdotal reports indicate that it is difficult for Australian medical scientists to obtain registration in most US States.

New Zealand requires registration of medical laboratory scientists.

3. Identify areas where Australia's procedures can be improved including in terms of:

- *Communication of processes to users*
- *Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers*
- *Early identification and response to persons needing skills upgrading*
- *Awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers*
- *Achieving greater consistency in recognition of qualifications for occupational licensing by state and territory regulators*
- *Alternative approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications*
- *Communication of processes to users*

Communication can be improved in a number of areas, not only to users, but also to assessing bodies.

The majority of AIMS's clients are planning to apply for permanent residency under the General Skilled Migration programme. As outlined above, graduates of AIMS accredited degree programmes are assessed as medical scientists on graduation. A significant number of our clients have completed degrees in Australia, but very few of the applicants for assessment as medical scientist have completed an AIMS accredited degree. Most of those who have completed Australian general science bachelor degrees have no medical laboratory science experience, and are ineligible to sit the AIMS Professional Examination or to be assessed as medical scientists. These applicants appear totally unaware of the requirements for assessment as a medical scientist or of the existence of accredited degree courses until they apply to AIMS (unsuccessfully) for assessment as medical scientists. In many cases these applicants have assumed that the course they have undertaken will provide them with immediate entry to the profession and assessment as medical scientists. It is difficult to believe that these students were not led to this assumption by the promotional activities of the

universities concerned. These unsuccessful applicants are not only denied the much sought after 60 points, they have spent many thousands of dollars on an educational course they believed (incorrectly) would qualify them as medical scientists.

Communication from the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) to assessing authorities is generally poor. Professional bodies are rarely advised of changes to DIMIA policies and procedures and rely on newspapers and information from clients for this information. Regular information on changes and procedures would be most helpful for assessing authorities.

Financial constraints and a major reorganisation and staff changes appear to have been the main reasons for lack of communication between AEI-NOOSR and the assessing bodies and the long time lag between meetings. This issue was raised at the meeting of professional bodies with AEI-NOOSR earlier this year and a commitment given by AEI-NOOSR to remedy the situation. This department should be adequately funded to enable regular meetings to be held and to enable AEI-NOOSR to fulfil its liaison and support role to the assessing bodies.

Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers

A number of health professional bodies (including AIMS) hold their professional examination twice yearly in March and September; the closing dates for these examinations are in the preceding December (for March examinations) and June (for September examinations). An applicant lodging an application for assessment who misses the relevant cut-off date may therefore have to wait nine or ten months from the date of lodgement of the application before receiving notification of their final result. This may have implications for on-shore applicants holding student visas and should be taken into consideration by DIMIA.

Early identification and response to persons needing skills upgrading

As part of the assessment feedback, AIMS will assist applicants by suggesting appropriate courses.

Awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers

As noted above, AIMS assesses applicants for both migration and employment purposes. Many employers require eligibility for professional membership of AIMS as a prerequisite for employment as a medical scientist. The absence of registration for medical scientists, however, leaves the door open for some employers to engage laboratory scientists with inadequate training and experience, which may pose a potential threat to quality health service.

Achieving greater consistency in recognition of qualifications for occupational licensing by state and territory regulators

There is no state or territory registration of medical scientists. The assessment by AIMS is recognised Australia-wide.

Alternative approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications

The work of medical laboratory scientists is a vital part of the health care system. It is estimated that up to 70% of all medical diagnoses depend on laboratory tests, so it is

essential that the scientists conducting these tests be highly trained and experienced. AIMS would not endorse any system of skills recognition that did not have major input from the medical laboratory science profession.

Authorised by AIMS National Executive 21 June 2005.

For further information contact
Jan Noble
Executive Officer
AIMS