

## Academic absenteeism

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**TO THE EDITOR:** Van Der Weyden raises an interesting issue in his recent column *From the Editor's Desk*.<sup>1</sup> It has long been known that the collective noun for academics is “an absence of”! He is absolutely correct in pointing out that research is valued far more than teaching. That is the reality of current university funding and is at risk of becoming more so, given the research assessment exercise currently being introduced by the federal government.<sup>2</sup>

This raises the whole issue of professorial titles. In a world where elitism is

considered not politically correct, we should perhaps dump these titles entirely. I have long yearned for a system like that in the United States, where an individual enters the academic stream at the level of Assistant Professor, progresses to Associate Professor and then Professor (finally being offered tenure after winning the Nobel Prize). This leads to the situation where the “professorial denominator” is not used — individual academics (like other staff) are introduced as “Doctor”.

In Australia, many Associate Professors drop the “Associate”, and most “clinical” title holders seem very keen to add their academic titles to their private practice shingles and letterheads. I have often considered doing an economic analysis of the annual value of a title to a doctor's practice (which I suspect is considerable), and charging appropriately. A decade ago, the

then President of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and myself, as Honorary Secretary, decided to replace professorial titles with “Dr” in all College mail-outs. This lasted about 6 weeks, with a veritable flurry of responses pointing out that we had failed to address these Fellows appropriately.

What Van Der Weyden highlights are the real pressures currently on academic medicine, and the need for real debate in the medical community about the worth of academe and the absolute essential building blocks — research, learning and service — of any credible health system.

1 Van Der Weyden MB. Academic absenteeism [From the Editor's Desk]. *Med J Aust* 2005; 183: 337.

2 Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training. Research quality framework. Available at: [http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/research\\_sector/policies\\_issues\\_reviews/key\\_issues/](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/research_sector/policies_issues_reviews/key_issues/) (accessed Oct 2005). □