ACADEMIES OF HEALTH SCIENCES

Health care in Australia seems to lurch from one crisis to another. Symptomatic of this perpetual state of confusion and conflict is the recent community unrest at the government's slashing of the Medicare rebate for cataract surgery, and the uncertainty surrounding the roll-out of the pandemic (H1N1) 2009 vaccination program, allegedly because of safety issues and failure to indemnify doctors administering the vaccine. These examples of disarray and discontent are but the tip of the iceberg.

Why all this recurring turmoil? Its root causes are multifactorial, but prominent among them must be the quality of the Australian Government's ministerial advice, be it from the Treasury or the Department of Health and Ageing. Few in the bureaucracy or politics have any clinical background, and most are largely consumed by the imperative to slash expenditure. These shortcomings are further compounded by a political failure to connect and consult with organised medicine.

In other countries, things are done differently. In the United States, when the President and Congress want objective evidence on health issues, they call on the Institute of Medicine. In the United Kingdom, when the Prime Minister and Parliament require similar advice, they turn to the Academy of Medical Sciences. Likewise, the Canadians turn to the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences.

Composed of a representative array of distinguished leaders in the health disciplines, these bodies address issues in health which require expert analysis that is independent of vested interests. They are capable of providing a rapid response, at arm's length from political considerations.

Instead of the cavalcade of recent inquiries and their pending pandemic of reports, would we not be better served by investing in an Academy of Health Sciences? Indeed, in addition to the aforementioned countries, France, Germany, Italy and Japan also consult the collective expertise of such academies. They are viewed as a valued part of the solution.

However, in any democracy, the recommendations of these academies will ultimately require both community and professional debate.

“Medicine is a social science and politics is nothing but medicine writ large.”

Martin B Van Der Weyden

From the Editor’s Desk

LETTERS

Is viral nucleic acid testing of eye donors cost-effective?
408 Paul R Badenoch, Douglas J Coster

Inadequate data collection prevents health planning for released prisoners
408 Kristy A Martire, Sarah Larmey

Cruelty towards the family pet: a survey of women experiencing domestic violence on the Central Coast, New South Wales
409 Cheryl Travers, Andrew Dixon, Karen Thorne, Kaye Spicer

The private hospital: a potential surgical training ground
410 Lih-Ming Wong, Lisa P Wun, Julie Shaw, Dominic Vellar

Effect of swimming pools on antibiotic use and clinic attendance for infections in two Aboriginal communities in Western Australia
410 Anu A Mathew, Collin J McDonnell, Jill Benson, Hugh R Taylor

Avoidable hospitalisation in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory
411 Odette R Gibson, Leonie Segal, Shu Q Li, Natalie J Gray, Steve L Guthridge, Sabine L M Pircher

Are we ready for the next big thing?
412 Heather J Cleland
413 Derek H Meyers
413 Stephen J Duckett

Prolonged varicella viraemia and streptococcal toxic shock syndrome following varicella vaccination of a health care worker
413 Sam S Mehr, Andrew S Kemp

Non-invasive prenatal diagnosis — toward a new horizon
414 Marleen R Susman, David J Amor, Jane L Halliday

Making cars and making health care: a critical review
414 Susan Ieraci
415 Sarah Winch, Amanda J Henderson

Smoking and The Simpsons
415 Nicholas Jefferson-Lenskyj
415 Becky Freeman

Chromobacterium violaceum endocarditis and hepatic abscesses treated successfully with meropenem and ciprofloxacin
416 Richard N Pearson

MJA BOOK LAUNCH

364 MJA Books launches new quality and safety guidebook
Rivqa Berger

BOOK REVIEW

412 The wisdom of whores. Bureaucrats, brothels, and the business of AIDS reviewed by David L Bradford

362 IN THIS ISSUE
388 JULY MJA BOOKCLUB WINNER
406 IN OTHER JOURNALS

MJA Rapid Online Publication: denotes an article fast tracked for online publication

Cover image courtesy: Bowel Cancer Australia <www.bowelcanceraustralia.org>.

MJA • Volume 191 Number 7 • 5 October 2009 361