

State GP of the Year finalists announced

The best general practitioners in the country have been nominated and chosen, leading up to the GP17 conference later in 2017.

THE Royal Australian College of General Practitioners has announced the state finalists for the 2017 RACGP Awards. The national winners in each award will be honoured at GP17, being held in Sydney from 26-28 October.

The *MJA* caught up with a few of the finalists.



Dr Walid Jammal is the NSW finalist in the GP of the Year award. Dr Jammal, 51, is a University of Sydney graduate (1989) and practices in Bella Vista, in Sydney's northwest, as part of WentWest, the Western Sydney Primary Health Network.

Dr Jammal's passion is reform of the health care system, via the Health Care Homes model of care. "We've been working on this for a couple of years now," he tells the *MJA*. "Our passion is for changing the system in order to give better quality care to our patients.

"The challenge is trying to provide quality care, then proving the quality of the outcomes, and then being recognised for it. The limitation, of course, is the mechanism of funding.

"I want to be able to look after the patient in front of me, and the 900 who are not in front of me, particularly the ones with chronic diseases. I want to develop a population-based approach but right now I'm doing it with one hand tied behind my back. I want to 'unshackle' general practice."

Dr Jammal has a simple philosophy when it comes to treating his patients.

"Treat the patient for who they are. Ask them, 'what's important to you?', not 'what's wrong with you?'. It's important to remember that I only see a snapshot of their life and their health depends on the other 23 hours and 40 minutes of their day when I don't see them."

When offered the chance of a "magic wand" to change one thing that would make a positive difference to his patients and colleagues, Dr Jammal has a quick answer:

"Make our [Health Care Homes] vision come to life."



Dr Adam Coltzau is the Queensland finalist in the GP of the Year award. Dr Coltzau, 43, is a University of Queensland graduate (2000) and practices in St George, in the central south of the state. Apart from taking care of his patients, he also spends time working with the RDAQ Foundation, helping to raise funds for "projects that directly help rural and remote Queenslanders" and students, registrars and doctors working in rural and remote settings.

"I'm interested in going a bit further, by helping other GPs to do their job," Dr Coltzau tells the *MJA*.

His philosophy is simple. "We see a lot of patients through the day, and we tend to run behind, but I always think about treating each patient the best I can in the time I've got with them."

Dr Coltzau sees the biggest challenge for general practice as sustainability.

"Small family owned rural practices, like the one I'm a part of, can't get any more efficient," he says. "They are struggling to keep their heads above water, thanks to the ever-mounting demands of accreditation and paperwork.

"We are offering good service, affordably, but we're not expanding. We don't have the latest equipment. The fanciest machine we have is the ECG we bought 3 years ago. By the time we spend money on compliance, accreditation and staff ..."

When offered the "magic wand" option, Dr Coltzau says he would update the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and the Medicare Benefits Schedule to better represent the hard work done by generalists, suggesting that the gap between GPs and specialists "needs to be narrowed".



Dr Amanda Bethell is the South Australian/Northern Territory finalist in the GP of the Year award. Dr Bethell, 44, is a University of Adelaide graduate (1997) and practices in Port Augusta, on the east coast of South Australia's Spencer Gulf. Apart from her clinical work, she and her husband helped set up a house church and organise a monthly "multicultural meal" which is aimed at migrants but at which all are welcome.

Dr Bethell has been supervising medical students since she arrived in Port Augusta 5.5 years ago, and has taken on registrars over the past year.

"It is hard to recruit doctors here, even though Port Augusta is a fantastic place," she tells the *MJA*. "There's heaps of diversity in the work, the hospital work is quite well supported and there's a separate anaesthetic group, so you don't have to be a superhero at everything."

Dr Bethell's philosophy is to give each patient as much time as possible, so she sees fewer patients as others. "As a Christian, my guiding principle is that everyone has a right to their place on earth, so I want to listen and give them time and respect."

The understaffing of rural health is "getting worse rather than better", she says. "I was the first Australian-trained GP in Port Augusta for decades. There have been international graduates who have come, but few have stayed to become career country GPs."

Dr Bethell's other big challenge is fighting for safe working hours for country doctors. Doctors in Port Augusta are "on-call" for 24-hour shifts in the hospital emergency department, but often end up in the ED for the full 24 hours.

"It's unsafe for patients and doctors, and not good for the doctors' work/life balance. Personally, I've told Country Health SA that me and my registrars will work 12-hour shifts and that's it."

The other state finalists for GP of the Year are Dr Elizabeth Elliott (Tasmania), Dr Richard Milner (Victoria), and Dr David Oldham (Western Australia).

Other awards:

Registrar of the Year finalists: Dr Adelaide Louisa Boylan (SA and NT), Dr Ginita Oberoi (Tasmania), Dr Sarah Newman (WA).

General Practice Supervisor of the Year finalists: Dr Samuel Russell Heard (SA and NT), Dr David Knowles (Tasmania), Dr Harinder Paul (WA).

General Practice of the Year finalists: Arkaba Medical Centre (SA and NT), Saunders Street Clinic (Tasmania), Atticus Health Carrum (Victoria), Canning Vale Medical Centre (WA).

Cate Swannell

doi: 10.5694/mjal71707C1