

Driving the AMSA agenda

Rob Thomas, president of the Australian Medical Students' Association, talks about the burning need for universities to teach medical students how to survive in the "real" world of medicine ...

ROB Thomas is president of the Australian Medical Students' Association (AMSA). He's passionate about medical education, the administration of health care systems, and the mental health of his fellow medical students.

A University of Queensland student, Rob has taken a year off from his studies to be the best student advocate possible. He has been inspired by the stories of student engagement and resilience that he heard at the recent Australian Indigenous Doctors Association conference. And he's been devastated to see members of his cohort struggling with their mental health.

"There's been a lot of media attention lately on the mental health of junior

"I wrote an article for [the medical press] recently and was astounded by some of the comments it received. The attitude of 'toughen up princess' and 'you don't have it as hard as we did back in my day' ... that's not okay. That's what has to change," he says.

"We can't treat other people if we can't treat ourselves."

AMSA has many targets on its advocacy agenda apart from students' mental health, however.

Medical student numbers, training places and internships, Indigenous student retention, same-sex marriage – "I'm very proud that we're supporting it" – and sexual assault on campuses, are just some of the hot-button issues.

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doctors and we're certainly grateful for that," Rob tells the *MJA*.

"The COAG health ministers are now reviewing the concept of mandatory reporting, and that's also good.

"But that's not going to solve anything for medical students."

The oft-quoted *beyondblue* National Mental Health Survey of Doctors and Medical Students that was published in October of 2013, showed that final year medical students report more distress than first year interns.¹

"Universities have a responsibility to prepare us for the real world," Rob says. "That includes appropriate reporting structures, self-care, resilience, and peer-care."

"It's been devastating for all of us [medical students] to hear about suicides of our colleagues and friends. But it's heartening to see doctors beginning to stand up and advocate for cultural change, which is hard.

The Human Rights Commission's *National report on sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities 2017*² was "damning", according to Rob.

"The results were horrendous."

The report found that in 2016 alone one in five (21%) students were sexually harassed in a university setting, excluding travel to and from the university. Almost 2% were sexually assaulted in a university setting at least once in 2015 or 2016. Around half of all sexual assaults and harassment were perpetrated by someone the student knew. And between 87% and 94% of the incidents went unreported.

Rob Thomas believes the problem is not confined to the university campuses, however.

"We have students in clinical settings," he says. "Reporting systems for students in hospitals are so unclear. They're not employees of the hospital, they're not even viewed as volunteers. We worry about those students."



"We've called for a reporting process which is independent of the academic process, so students don't have to worry about whether reporting an assault will affect their grades.

"It's difficult, for example, when the one person who is both your supervisor and your assessor might also be the perpetrator of the assault."

Rob will resume his final year at the University of Queensland in 2018 with his future beyond graduation a bit of a mystery. And he's okay with that.

"Even in medicine now there's a theme beginning to emerge of work/life balance and I think that's fantastic," he says.

"I don't always think that I'm going to be a doctor all that long. Medicine opens so many other doors. For me that might be medical administration or politics."

"We talk a lot about being a 'non-linear' doctor – not having to follow one career path all our lives. That's thought-provoking."

References

1. *beyondblue: National Mental Health Survey of Doctors and Medical Students*; October 2013; https://www.beyondblue.org.au/docs/default-source/research-project-files/bl1132-report---nmhdmss--full-report_web
2. Human Rights Commission: *National report on sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities 2017*; <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/change-course-national-report-sexual-assault-and-sexual>

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