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 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.

“Universities have a responsibility to prepare us for the real world ... that includes appropriate reporting structures, self-care, resilience, and peer-care”

The Human Rights Commission’s National report on sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities 2017 was “damning”, according to Rob.

“The results were horrendous.”

The report found that in 2016 alone one in five (21%) students were sexually harassed within 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


Cate Swannell

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