



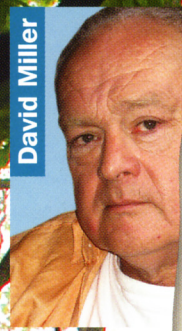
The GP shortage

Australia is running out of GPs and people in both city and country are feeling it. Many other doctors are falling between the stools and nurse practitioners are being brought forward to fill the gap, to diagnose and treat, which is not the usual

role for our valuable nurses.

The following story aims to explore some of the forces in the struggle for power at the coalface of primary medical care.

David Miller



The Story of the Apprentice Doctor

Every year for two weeks, an apprentice doctor would travel north out from the stone walls of her university. Her quest - to learn the art of general practice through placement with an experienced village GP.

The result of an enlightened scheme called a John Flynn Scholarship, this journey was designed to foster a mentor relationship with this established rural doctor.

She gained in wisdom and knowledge of the local community, made many friends and came to know something about the provision of health care.

As the time of her graduation to fully fledged doctor grew near, the mentor was so pleased he asked her to join his practice.

"Alas", she said, "I cannot. I must off to specialise."

"But why?" he asked. "Is general practice not good enough?"

"Your practice is lovely" she said. "I love the roses and honeysuckles that adorn your garden where the patients sit and wait but general practice is just another specialty and I must choose."

"Why are there no aspiring GPs? Where have they all gone?"

"Gone to specialise every one."

"When will they ever learn?" he sighed.

"Surgeons are much better paid," she told him bluntly.

"The training is just as arduous and takes almost as long. So I must away".

The GP mentor decided he must make a pilgrimage to the capital and seek counsel from the ministerial oracle. He approached, and in the distance heard a merry din. It was a policy speech called 'The Light on the Hill'. But the light was only a mirage.

"What will my patients do without succession planning for GPs?" he asked at question time.

"I am not the minister for doctors", the high priestess of health growled at him. "Your time is up."

Just then the next supplicant, obviously suffering, struggled on a crutch to approach the oracle, pleading, "I am a patient and seek the services of a GP."

"They are yesterday's men. Try one of our new nurse practitioner products," the oracle advised. "They are much more kindly. According to a Dutch study, you will get an average of 12.22 minutes as opposed to the measly 9.2 provided by cold hearted GPs. The good news is that as we speak, a large cohort of these nurse practitioners is gathering to the sound of a drum here at the capital, to be dispersed to all corners of the land where the intransigent GPs won't go. They are much cheaper for our government as well," she added as an afterthought.

His questions unanswered, the GP had need to continue his quest and so sought out his old apprentice for clarification. He found her in the emergency

department of the Black Stump Hospital, chained in penury to the new user unfriendly eMR (electronic medical records) system.

"Where have all the doctors gone?" he asked her. "And by the way, what are you doing here? Have you committed some crime?"

"There is no doctor shortage," she told him. "You can find some of the missing in far-flung emergency departments. We live between worlds. The way into specialist school has closed and we have also missed the bus to the guild of GPs. We are like wandering Samurai, doctors without masters destined to forever wander the land of ED. They keep us quiet with good hourly rates, but the doors of destiny are closed forever behind us. The final destination in our confused journey is called 'career medical officer'. We can never be GPs in the community nor specialists in ivory towers. We are just hospital fodder. That holy grail of doctors, the Medicare provider number, must remain always beyond reach."

"But," she asked her old mentor, "If there are no doctors, where have all the patients gone?"

"Gone to nurses, every one."

"Ah, when will they ever learn?"

"When will they ever learn?"

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