

System not ready for medical challenges

Australia's health system will be ill prepared to deal with the increasing burden of disease in the future without drastic changes in the medical workforce.

This is the key message from the director of the new Menzies Centre for Public Health Policy and Practice at the Australian National University, Robert Wells.

Speaking at an international conference on workforce issues, Mr Wells called for the introduction of flexible working patterns and multi-disciplinary teamwork.

He said tomorrow's doctors and nurses would be faced with patients who were older, more likely to suffer from a chronic condition and better informed by using the Internet.

"It's going to be a much more complex health picture in the future and the workforce shortage is unlikely to improve, considering the lower birth rate numbers since the 1970s," Mr Wells said.

"We're not likely to have enough doctors to replace the ones we have.

"There needs to be urgent

change in models of training so our workforce is ready for the challenges."

Mr Wells said the training should focus on building better teamwork among professionals with different specialties.

"Doctors and nurses are trained separately, allied health workers and pharmacists are also separate bodies," he said.

"So these groups go out into the workforce with little understanding of each other's skills and what they can offer each other.

"The Australian health workforce is characterised by strong professional demarcations. Surely this is not in the best interests of patients' care."

New practitioners also had to be properly prepared for exposure to a broader range of illnesses and diseases.

Training doctors solely in hospitals meant there weren't many training opportunities for them as there might be in general practice.