The Professional Development Year

A number of pathways exist for professional entry to medical imaging and radiation therapy in Australia. In addition to the pathway that exists for professionals with qualifications obtained overseas, Australian graduates may obtain a Validated Statement of Accreditation (VSoA) from the Australian Institute of Radiography (AIR) by following one of two pathways – either completion of an AIR accredited university programme that leads directly to VSoA, or completion of an AIR accredited university programme that leads to a Provisional Statement of Accreditation and the successful completion of a period of supervised postgraduate practice approved by the AIR. The recently introduced National Professional Development Programme (NPDP) replaces the Professional Development Year (PDY) as the AIR’s supervised practice programme.

The AIR introduced the PDY in 1992 in response to developments in the education of beginning practitioners in radiography and radiation therapy. The most notable of these developments was the progression of entry-level university programmes from diploma to degree level. The advanced academic expectations at a Bachelor degree level resulted in a substantial reduction in hours of professional clinical practice experienced by many students, from approximately 3500 hours in the diploma programmes to approximately 900–1000 hours for the degree programmes.

Development, implementation and maintenance of the PDY programme are challenging. The PDY programme requires that at the conclusion of 48 fulltime equivalent weeks of supervised postgraduate practice, graduates demonstrate that they are competent in a range of clinical experience and professional attribute areas. While the discipline-specific clinical experience areas are distinct, the PDY programme is largely identical for medical imaging and radiation therapy. State-based variation of the requirements and elements of the PDY programme may be permitted at the discretion of the Professional Accreditation and Education Board (PAEB), the AIR panel responsible for the PDY. Graduate practitioners and supervisors are situated in clinical centres distributed all over Australia, sometimes in genuinely remote and isolated locations. Administrative support for the PDY programme depends significantly upon a workforce of volunteers. There had been limited evaluation or redevelopment of the PDY programme since its inception until the implementation of the National Professional Development Programme Review (NPDPDR) in 2008. The NPDPDR was implemented as a result of feedback over several years that suggested the professional community felt a degree of confusion and dissatisfaction with the PDY programme. Some professionals perceived that the PDY programme lacked consistency in regard to the experiences encountered by graduates, the degree of supervision, the manner in which graduate performance was evaluated and the degree to which graduates developed their professional skills, knowledge and attributes. The aim of the NPDPDR was to comprehensively review and redesign the PDY programme.

The PDY was predicated on the notion that the graduate practitioner in the first year following graduation requires the guidance of more experienced practitioners. The PDY also aims to prevent graduate practitioners from being placed in sole practice situations which are not perceived as conducive to development of skills and competencies.1 The AIR intends that the structure and context of the PDY should “ensure that the graduate practitioner develops the necessary confidence, skills and understanding of the Accredited Practitioner role.”1 In this issue of The Radiographer, Wendy Tan Liang, Warren Reed and Maila Agudera present some insights into this notion of the graduate’s development of confidence through the findings of their examination of new radiography graduates in Sydney.

The experience of graduate practitioners in their first postgraduate year of professional practice varies considerably throughout Australia for a number of reasons, including availability and access to resources, organisational learning culture, individual graduate performance and more. Graduates experience varying degrees of support during the first postgraduate year, from highly structured educational programmes and on-going performance assessment to those graduates employed in organisations where there is no perceivable distinction between the expectations of graduate practitioners and other professionals.2 Where centre-based development programmes exist, it is likely that the content, structure and format might vary considerably. PDY education programmes that primarily intend to introduce clinical working practices,3 while unquestionably important, may lack explicit focus on other dimensions of professional practice such as critical thinking, ethical practice, research, patient advocacy, inter-professional relationships, mentoring and more. In this issue of The Radiographer, Janine Downie, Naomi Findlay and Sharon Oultram present the findings of their research, indicating that new graduates possess a keen interest in developing their knowledge in many other dimensions of professional practice beyond purely technical elements.

Just as the graduate experience of the PDY programme has relied upon the contribution and stewardship of clinical professionals, the co-ordination and administration of the PDY programme has hinged upon the commitment and dedication of a generous workforce of volunteers. Members of the Professional Accreditation and Education Committees (PAEC) in each state and the PAEB have, for many years, donated their time, effort, care and passion to supporting the needs and goals of graduates and the professional community. Such responsibilities have been significant, and these volunteers have contributed this professional service in their own time. Undoubtedly, at times, we have each likely disagreed with a particular decision, policy or initiative but, equally, we have all benefited from the collective effort of the members of the PAEB and PAECs. Our professional community owes these willing volunteers enormous gratitude.

With the implementation of the NPDP, we experience yet another change in the professional-entry pathway for medical imaging and radiation therapy in Australia. The NPDP provides a mechanism for Australian medical imaging and radiation therapy graduates to attain recognition as an Accredited Practitioner by the AIR. The NPDP facilitates the consolidation of the skills, knowledge and professional attributes described in the AIR Competency Based Standards for the Accredited Practitioner (CBS) by providing a national structured framework for graduates to undergo professional peer assessment of their ability in a supervised clinical environment. The NPDP directly reflects the scope of practice and elements defined in the CBS. Graduates are supported in their development through formal feedback and evaluation of their competence across five review areas that reflect the CBS standards of:
1 Knowledge and understanding
2 Critical thinking and evaluation
3 Professional and ethical practice
4 Care and clinical management
5 Lifelong learning.

Clinical supervisors are supported through a formal supervisor education programme and indicators and cues for evaluating graduate performance. The expectations for graduates, clinical professionals and the AIR are explicit, as are the expectations for ongoing quality management of the programme.

As has occurred with every other previous development, the NPDP has and should cause us to reflect and consider our personal and professional opinions, and to question what it is we think we know for sure. What is your opinion of the required year of postgraduate supervised practice, its purpose, function and value? Do you believe that our profession benefits by requiring postgraduate supervised practice, and what is the evidence on which you base your view? Do our patients benefit because of our requirement for postgraduate supervised practice, or is mentored or monitored practice just as effective but less restrictive? What is your view of the various professional-entry pathways, and is your view based upon evidence, your lived experience, hearsay or something else?

We work and live in an environment of constant change, including change in education and professional-entry. We can be confident that this constant change is very unlikely to abate. Your professional views and opinions matter and they make a difference. So share them, enter the discussion and engage in the debate.

Sharon A Brackenridge
Director National Professional Development Programme Review
M Higher Ed (Teaching & Learning), M Health Sc (Med Rad Sc), Dip App Sc (Ther Rad), MIR

Correspondence to npdp@air.asn.au

References

Further reading
The NPDP Guide is available at http://www.air.asn.au/files/07_ClinicalTraining/01011_Guide_NPDP.pdf or upon request to npdp@air.asn.au.
The initial Discussion Paper for the NPDPR is available upon request to npdp@air.asn.au.