RACS committed to building respect and improving patient safety

Monday 7 March, 2016

The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) has marked the 12-month anniversary of public controversy about bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment in surgery, with a plea from the College President to 7,000 surgeons.

Professor David Watters OBE has urged all the College’s Fellows, Trainees and International Medical Graduates to share and actively support RACS’ commitment to building respect and improving patient safety.

“One year ago, the College was challenged about our failure to deal effectively with these serious and persistent issues,” Professor Watters said.

“We should remember the discomfort and disquiet we felt then, and use it to renew our commitment to doing everything we can to provide a safe environment for our Trainees and International Medical Graduates and build a healthy culture in surgery,” he said.

Twelve months ago, the College established an Expert Advisory Group (EAG) to advise it on ways to deal more effectively with bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment in surgery.

In September 2015, the EAG published its report on the extent of these problems and made recommendations about what the College should do. The College accepted the EAG recommendations in full and issued an apology.

In November 2015, RACS published an Action Plan that translates the recommendations of the EAG into a comprehensive, multi-year program of work designed to promote respect, counter discrimination, bullying and sexual harassment in the practice of surgery, and improve patient safety.

“We have come a long way in a year and are now actively bringing the Action Plan to life,” Professor Watters said.

The Action Plan to build respect and improve patient safety is designed around three themes: Cultural change and leadership; surgical education and complaints management. It sets eight goals, so the College can monitor its progress and make sure that its actions make a difference.

The goals include embracing diversity and fostering gender equity, increasing transparency, independent scrutiny and external accountability, building a culture of respect and collaboration in surgical practice and education.

“I said last year that we must do some things differently, deal with the behaviours we have said we will not tolerate and champion those that will help build a respectful, collaborative culture,” Professor Watters said.

Some of the results of our work will be visible quickly, and others will take longer to make an impact, he said.

Already, the College:

- Has established a new complaints management process that includes independent scrutiny and more flexible complaints resolution options, and appointed a complaints resolution manager
- Is in active discussions with a series of health services and hospitals in Australia and New Zealand about working closely together to more effectively deal with concerns and help build respect and improve patient safety in surgery and

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• Is developing new programs to improve the quality of trainee supervision and education and provide specific training that will be mandatory for all surgeons on ways to identify and address bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment.

From May 2016, RACS will roll out a campaign to support cultural change and leadership in surgery, and profile the work of the action plan.

“I am confident that with a shared commitment from surgeons in Australia and New Zealand we will build respect and improve patient safety in surgery,” Professor Watters said.

“In the years ahead we will be engaging surgeons in this challenge and supporting their leadership of cultural change in our profession,” he said.

Ends

About the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS)
RACS is the leading advocate for surgical standards, professionalism and surgical education in Australia and New Zealand. The College is a not-for-profit organisation that represents more than 7000 surgeons and 1300 surgical trainees and International Medical Graduates. RACS also supports healthcare and surgical education in the Asia-Pacific region and is a substantial funder of surgical research. There are nine surgical specialties in Australasia being: Cardiothoracic surgery, General surgery, Neurosurgery, Orthopaedic surgery, Otolaryngology Head-and-Neck surgery, Paediatric surgery, Plastic and Reconstructive surgery, Urology and Vascular surgery.

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