

Tasmanian death raises questions about doctor fatigue and travel safety

Royal Hobart Hospital cardiothoracic surgery registrar Dr Artyom Avetisyan died in a single-vehicle car crash on June 12, about 10.40pm, on the Midland Highway at Pontville in southern Tasmania. He had been working at an outpatient clinic in Launceston.

From Armenia, Dr Avetisyan had worked for almost three years with the Tasmanian Health Department and had been living in Australia since 2016, according to the ABC.

Despite the event occurring on the other side of the continent, the death nevertheless sent shock waves through the Western Australian medical community – from those who knew the doctor, or who had experiences of trips in Tasmania in similar circumstances. Inevitably, it has led to questions about the conditions under which doctors conduct their medical shifts.

AMA (WA) Vice President Dr Natalie Ferrington said the incident strongly correlated with workplace issues in WA.

"Equivalent roles here in Perth describe very similar conditions, not infrequently working 7-10pm in addition to being on call to return to the hospital every one in three nights without the following day off," Dr Ferrington said.

"It is a cultural expectation that you do these shifts without complaining or requesting time off. If you have a family, other

commitments, or simply do not wish to work the hours, you are encouraged to consider a different specialty."

Dr Ferrington also reflected on Dr Avetisyan's status as an international medical graduate (IMG).

"Many surgical departments rely on IMGs, who are often very highly trained overseas but need to qualify again here. In many cases therefore, they have even less choice regarding their workplace conditions," she said.

The latest Hospital Health Check (HHC) survey of WA's doctors in training (DiTs) recommended consultation with the AMA (WA) regarding improved fatigue management practices including rostering systems, on-call and re-call arrangements.

The AMA (WA) is beginning its consultation outreach with the Director General of Health and WA's hospital service providers to reflect on the results of the HHC and make the necessary improvements to conditions for DiTs.

DHASWA provides a confidential, anonymous advice line and referral system for health and personal problems for doctors and medical students in WA. Calls are exempt from the Medical Board of Australia's mandatory reporting requirements. ■

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