



# The stories behind the statistics

## How placement poverty is affecting WA medical students

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There has been a lot of media coverage on medical student placement poverty this year, and many of you would have seen statistics trying to highlight how big this problem truly is. While I think the statistics are important, I'd like to remind you of the students at the heart of these statistics. In particular, students you may have walked past already at your local WA hospital.

The Government justified not including medical students in the expansion of the Commonwealth Paid Practicum scheme because "there aren't shortages of people who want to do medical degrees". We believe students shouldn't have to live in poverty for the opportunity to become doctors and serve their communities, especially given the doctor shortages we are currently experiencing across the country.

We are proud to support our patients and medical teams – it's time the Government supported us.

We recently collected stories from WA medical students, and if I were to include everything they generously shared, this article would be more than 2,000 words long. This article belongs to them, so I'd like to share parts of their stories with you all.

Here's what they told us.

*"I have managed an average of 30 hours per week of paid work over weeknights and weekends, on top of 40 hours' unpaid placement. The absence of a decline in applications is not evidence that the burden does not exist. It is evidence that medical students have been willing to bear that burden because of our commitment to becoming the doctors the Australian community needs."*

*"It was incredibly isolating to suddenly be in a city alone living with strangers and in financial hardship."*

*"I've called in sick to uni to go to work instead so I'd have money for food and bills."*

*"As a student from a rural background, I have worked since year 8 to save up money for uni to afford time and less financial pressure during my studies. Since then, I have spent over \$20k of savings for food, rent and uni expenses which are not covered by the university or the government."*

*"I spend all my uni holidays working 70-hour shifts for harvest so I can afford to live in Perth and study my course. Next year I go on full-time prac and I can't fathom how I am going to afford it. I can't access Centrelink as my parents own businesses so are over the threshold, yet I pay for my life. Since moving to Perth, I have had seven jobs as no one is willing to accommodate the schedule for medical students."*

*"I don't have anyone behind me. It's just me, carrying all of it, all the time. There have been weeks where I've had to go without proper meals; weeks where I've gone without things I actually needed; and weeks where I've had to swallow my pride and ask the people around me for money just to get to the other side. I am trying, so hard, to become a good doctor. But I am doing it while also just trying to survive."*

*"The rent at campus is using all my savings to the point where I mostly have been living off rice for the past year because I cannot afford anything else."*

*"I can't help but notice how desperately we need doctors to work in places that serve rural people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, low income earning communities. The people who serve these communities best are born and raised here. It is difficult for people from here to get into and stay in medical school largely due to the cost. The paid placement scheme was an opportunity to allow some grace for these students who lie outside the stereotypical trope of the wealthy medical student. To say I am disappointed to see how undervalued our contributions to society are would be an understatement."*



If you would like to discuss anything in this article further, or would like to help with our placement poverty advocacy, please reach out via [chair.mscwa@amawa.com.au](mailto:chair.mscwa@amawa.com.au).