FED: Plibersek offers deal on medical interns

By Julian Drape

CANBERRA, Sept 26 AAP - The commonwealth has offered to fund 100 extra medical internships in the private sector next year as federal and state health ministers seek an agreement on how to overcome a shortfall in places.

Ministers held a phone hook-up on Wednesday to discuss who'd pay for 200-odd internships needed to ensure Australian-trained international students are not forced to head back overseas to find work as doctors.

It's understood the federal government has offered to provide one-off funding of $10 million for 100 extra intern places in the private sector in 2013.

In return, students would have to agree to work in areas where there are doctor shortages after they're registered. Most would end up heading to the bush.

Federal Labor's deal is also conditional on the states and territories agreeing to a new national intern application and offer system that would be managed by Health Workforce Australia.

The commonwealth would pay 50 per cent of the costs of the system, which would aim to ensure there weren't shortfalls in the future.

Victorian Health Minister David Davis has been pushing the federal government to fund intern places in the private health system, general practice and other community settings to match the increase in graduate numbers.

"Victoria is providing an unprecedented number of training places, and it is now up to the commonwealth to deliver on its own responsibilities and fund more places in the private and not-for-profit sectors," Mr Davis said in a statement on Wednesday.

Federal Labor's proposal is likely to be welcomed by the private sector.

Catholic Health Australia - which operates 54 private hospitals - earlier this year said it could establish intern programs "where they currently do not exist".

But its chief executive, Martin Laverty, said red tape would need to be slashed and a long-term commitment made.

Before Wednesday's meeting federal Health Minister Tanya Plibersek said it was important for Australia's international reputation that overseas students secured internships.

"These students have paid for five or six years for university education here," she told ABC Radio.

"As a commonwealth government we've put extra money into training medical students, and I'm happy to come to the table to this internship year issue as well.

"But I need the states and territories to dig deeper and place some of these students in their public hospital system."

More than 3000 medical students will graduate at the end of this year. All Australian students have found internships for 2013, but around 200 international students have so far missed out.

Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand president Justin Beilby says locally trained students want to work as doctors in Australia.

He was hopeful before Wednesday's phone hook-up that the commonwealth would deliver.

"It's an issue of leadership," Professor Beilby told AAP on Wednesday.

"The federal minister has given us a clear indication she's willing to stay at the table until this is resolved. I'm feeling very positive."

It's understood further discussions regarding the commonwealth's offer are scheduled for early next week.

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