Foreign-trained doctors struggle to pass SA exam

ONLY 60 percent of South Africa’s foreign-trained doctors pass the mandatory Health Professions Council of SA (HPCSA) board exam that allows them to practise medicine in the country. And despite some spending up to R500 000 on a foreign medical degree, hundreds of foreign-trained doctors never get to practise in South Africa because if they fail the board exam three times, they are disqualified from taking it again. This is according to the HPCSA, whose figures show that at least 10 applicants each year fail the test three times. The council’s communications manager, Priscilla Sekhonyana, said at least 40 foreign-trained medics took the board exam every year. And that number is set to increase as an increasing number of South African students head overseas to study medicine - mainly in China, Mauritius and Turkey - because of the limited number of spaces available at the eight medical schools in the country. While it is not known exactly how many South African students are studying overseas, Zaheer Jalal, a local recruiter who helps facilitate students wanting to study abroad, said his agency had sent 70 students to China over the past three years. None of them has yet graduated or taken the HPCSA board exam. And as hundreds of recently matriculated students start packing their bags to study medicine abroad, authorities were warning them to ensure the institutions they choose are accredited. The charge was recently led by KwaZulu-Natal Health MEC, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, who warned medical students studying overseas to first ensure, through the HPCSA, that qualifications from the universities where they intended to study, were recognised in South Africa. He said that a number of foreign-trained students were “languishing at home”, unable to practise in South Africa. The president of the South African Medical Association, Dr Phophi Ramathuba, agreed. She said parents, out of desperation, especially those with money, send their children
overseas, but sometimes they don’t ask if those medical schools are recognised here.

Part of the problem, Ramathuba said, was that South Africa had too few medical schools compared with other countries. Cuba, for example, has more than 11 medical schools, while Brazil had over 200. Sekhonyana said most of the South African students studying overseas were at the Shandong Medical University in China, Mauritius University and SSR Medical College in Mauritius. She said that in order for foreign-trained doctors to pass the HPCSA board exam, they needed to complete two tests. The pass mark is 50 percent on both parts. The HPCSA recognises all universities registered with the World Health Organisation, Sekhonyana said.

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