

ACADEMIC: LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Response to: “Starting off Well” – the quest of finding accommodation in Wellington and the impacts on student wellbeing

William Park

Dear Editor,

The paper “Starting off Well” by Michaela Walker and Mark Huthwaite published in the issue 35 of the *New Zealand Medical Student Journal* aptly outlined the challenges faced by Wellington-based medical students at the University of Otago Medical School.¹ I was particularly interested in the discussion regarding the role of the University in perpetuating the financial inequities experienced by Wellington-based students, and the implications for future students.

As outlined in the paper, the University of Otago cannot solve the cost of living crisis that underpins the financial challenges faced by medical students in Wellington. However, the campus is becoming an increasingly unpopular choice among medical students due to the discussed poor housing quality and high cost of living relative to its sister campuses (Dunedin and Christchurch). As a result, many students are unwillingly balloted to Wellington for their clinical years of study to ensure an even distribution of students between the campuses.

Throughout these clinical years, students are expected to self-fund regular placements outside of Wellington. Most students spend 10–12 weeks of their final year in regional placements, requiring short-term accommodation to be sought in addition to paying for existing accommodation. Some students are even balloted out of Wellington to regional centres for the entirety of the trainee intern year, requiring a costly move to a different city without logistical or financial support from the University. The process of balloting students unfortunately lacks official documentation but was described to me in an email from University administration in May 2022, as well as by affected students.

Despite the aforementioned financial and logistical challenges being disproportionately experienced by Wellington-based students throughout all three clinical years, these students receive no support from the University in finding or funding accommodation. The greater cost of living and burden of regional placements on Wellington-based students has implications for student wellbeing. Housing and financial insecurity contribute to poorer educational outcomes and these pressures may also discourage students from selecting the Wellington region for postgraduate employment.² However, support is evidently available elsewhere, for example medical students in Dunedin receive free accommodation for their rural GP and Southland Hospital placements, and RMIP students receive travel and accommodation support (MedMoodle – University of Otago, written communication, 2023 Aug 23).

The authors present a compelling narrative for the displeasure of Wellington-based medical students considering these issues, though I would be interested to see a comparative survey amongst the

Christchurch and Dunedin campuses to provide concrete evidence that the challenges do indeed disproportionately affect the Wellington cohort. This may then inform a more sensible distribution of financial resources between the campuses, with a range of strategies to implement the funding as insightfully discussed by the authors.

Clearly, the driving influences for these issues are upstream factors that cannot be modified by the University of Otago. Unless downstream action is taken by the University to address these inequities, Wellington will remain a less desirable location to spend the clinical years of medical school and the relative dissatisfaction of its students will continue, with potentially detrimental consequences for the wellbeing, achievement, and retention of medical students in Wellington.

References

1. Walker M, Huthwaite M. “Starting off Well” — The quest of finding suitable accommodation in Wellington and the impacts on student wellbeing. *N Z Med Stud J*. 2023;0(35):27–30. doi: 10.57129/001c.73285
2. Broton K. Poverty in American higher education: the relationship between housing insecurity and academic attainment. *J Postsecond Stud Success*. 2021;1(2):18–45. doi: 10.33009/fsop_jpss129147

About the author

> William was a trainee intern at the University of Otago, Wellington at the time of submission of this paper. He graduated with MBChB (Distinction) in 2023 and is now a House Officer in Te Whatu Ora Capital, Coast and Hutt Valley. He has interests in endocrinology, public health and medical education.

Declarations

The author had no sources of funding to declare. He was a peer reviewer for the NZMSJ at the time of article submission but was not involved in the review process for this manuscript.

Ethical approval/patient consent

Ethical approval and patient consent were not required for this article.

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