The RACGP’s annual conference proved a major hit with GPs from all over Australia.

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It’s almost 4.00 pm and the conference’s final presentations of the day are about to start. As all of the GPs finish afternoon tea and begin the walk from the exhibition hall towards the presentation rooms on the other side of the conference centre, they could be forgiven for starting to show some signs of fatigue during the closing stages of what has been a fairly long day.

But even after the 8.30 am start of the morning plenaries, followed by abstracts, workshops, skill-building sessions, and any number informal conversations with colleagues, most remain in a surprisingly upbeat mood.

The rather spectacular views of Darling Harbour afforded by Sydney’s International Conference Centre (ICC) – not to mention some of the coffee that seems to be available at every turn in the exhibition hall – had something of a soothing effect on the record 2278 delegates who attended the RACGP annual conference for general practice, GP17, in October.

‘This year’s conference was the best ever, as evidenced by the record of delegates...
who made it to the event in Sydney,’ RACGP President Dr Bastian Seidel told Good Practice. ‘The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and we are happy to have been able to offer members so many wonderful opportunities to reflect on and learn about their profession.

‘We are truly humbled by the way in which GPs from across Australia continue to embrace the RACGP and, in turn, will continue to strive for excellence in representing them as an academic, evidence-based college.’

Dr Seidel kicked off the conference on Wednesday 25 October when he opened the National Academic Session, Fellowship and Awards Ceremony, welcoming more than 200 New Fellows from all over Australia to their life in general practice.

‘You have indeed arrived at your profession, and your profession welcomes you,’ he told the New Fellows. ‘You are the future of our profession.’

The session also included the presentation of this year’s RACGP awards, including the Rose-Hunt Award, as well as the best GP, General Practice Registrar, Rural GP, Rural Registrar, General Practice Supervisor, General Practice of the Year, and many others.

Feature presentations

The conference got underway in a more official capacity with the opening plenary presentation on the morning of Thursday 26 October. Dr Seidel took the opportunity to emphasise the RACGP’s increasing diversity and advocacy efforts.

‘Why have we become so heavily involved in advocating for our profession? The answer to that is an easy one: because nobody is doing it for us,’ he said to the hundreds of delegates in attendance.

‘When we contribute to the public discourse on marriage equality, end-of-life choices, termination of pregnancies, healthcare in offshore detention centres and health effects of climate change, sitting on the fence is no longer what our members want or what the community would tolerate.

‘It might be uncomfortable; however, our advocacy will always be evidence-based. The community has a right to know where the RACGP stands. And for that, we need to have positions. There cannot be much wiggle room.’

Dr Seidel encouraged all attendees to reflect on their profession and consider ‘the big and challenging questions that need to be answered’.

‘Let’s advance this dialogue. Let’s progress it here, in Sydney. Let’s make it meaningful,’ he said. ‘We all are the RACGP, something we should be immensely proud of. So let’s celebrate our profession, our college and our members.’

Dr Seidel was followed on stage by US physician Dr Jay Parkinson, whose thought-provoking keynote address saw him challenge traditional views of patient interaction, ‘blowing up’ the idea that the consultation room is the exclusive domain of healthcare results.

As the CEO and founder of Sherpaa, the world’s first online medical practice, Dr Parkinson is in favour of greater levels of healthcare communication via online channels — in which doctors use an app to diagnose and treat patients, order tests, prescribe medications, and arrange necessary care with local specialists. Dr Parkinson labels this ‘virtual primary care 3.0’.

‘Virtual primary care 3.0 is about problem-solving over in-person relationships,’ he said.

While acknowledging the fact this way of thinking may make some Australian GPs uncomfortable, Dr Parkinson said he believes general practice must continue to ask questions about how doctors and patients connect and solve problems.

‘As GPs, I think we can define the future for ourselves and our patients. Otherwise, someone else will,’ he said.

Perhaps the conference’s most significant major presentation, however, came the following morning on Friday 27 October, when Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt made a major announcement during his keynote address.

‘General practice training is back with the RACGP, where it should always have been,’ he said to the applause of hundreds of GP delegates.

Beginning with a transitional period from January 2019 – December 2021, the RACGP and the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM) will resume delivery of training, encompassing the Australian General Practice Training (AGPT) program, from January 2022. >>
> “This announcement reflects the professionalism of the RACGP,” Dr Seidel said. “The RACGP has proven itself and is trusted to lead training of Australian GPs.”

In addition, Shadow Minister for Health Catherine King and Greens’ leader Dr Richard Di Natale each spoke, praising the efforts of GPs and of the RACGP.

Former Scottish chief medical officer Sir Henry ‘Harry’ Burns’ rousing presentation during the Saturday 28 October research plenary – in which he discussed how factors such as socioeconomic and psychosocial contribute to wellbeing – was among the most well-received of the conference.

“What causes poor health? Too much illness and not enough wellness,” he said.

“Wellness is not just the absence of illness.”

Other sessions
As always, GP17 was home to a number of lively and eye-opening abstract presentations, hands-on workshops, learning modules, and discussion forums. GPs from all areas of the profession discussed vital and topical issues such as codeine up-scheduling, medicinal cannabis, family violence, pain management, after-hours care, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, and much more.

In particular, the conference’s new ‘Clinical skills’ and ‘Professional skills-building’ streams were extremely popular, with most sessions filled to past capacity. Likewise, the pre-conference ALM (active learning module) day on Wednesday 25 October proved a major hit; delegates appreciated being able to take care of their learning and QI&CPD points before the official start of the conference, freeing up their time to attend more sessions and social gatherings.

Much as it did with delegates, GP17 set a record for exhibitors, with more than 95 showing their wares to GPs from all over Australia. GPs were able to connect with organisations and associations specialising in medical devices and equipment, pharmaceuticals, nutrition, recruitment, education, publications, software, finance and insurance, allied health, and more.

The interactive product zone allowed delegates the chance to get up close and personal with some of the products exhibitors had to offer, while the recharge lounge was a sanctuary for tired legs where GPs could restore themselves and their devices.

The GP17 social calendar was again packed. The conference welcome reception on Thursday 26 October featured a number of food stations – and accompanying live entertainment – from around the world. Many delegates took the opportunity to catch up and network with colleagues in the informal setting of the exhibition hall.

The annual RACGP Foundation Walk, starting at 7.00 am along the waters of Darling Harbour, was a highlight for the more active delegates. The RACGP national faculties evening, co-hosted by RACGP Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, RACGP Rural and RACGP Specific Interests, was held on Friday 27 October. Faculty members and friends were able to discuss and reflect on their involvement in different areas of general practice.

The social scene culminated with the black tie RACGP Foundation Gala Dinner on Saturday 28 October, helping to raise vital funds for general practice research.

The RACGP’s Immediate Past Vice-President Dr Edwin Kruys also took the opportunity on the final day to officially announce next year’s conference, GP18, which will be held on the Gold Coast from 11–13 October. The overarching theme of next year’s conference will be ‘General practice: The centre of health in Australia’. 📢