

Safe hands or radical advocacy - what do we want our College to represent in an age of escalating division and violence?

As a member of the medical profession:

I solemnly pledge to dedicate my life to the service of humanity;

The health and well-being of my patient will be my first consideration;

I will respect the autonomy and dignity of my patient;

I will maintain the utmost respect for human life;

I will not permit considerations of age, disease or disability, creed, ethnic origin, gender, nationality, political affiliation, race, sexual orientation, social standing or any other factor to intervene between my duty and my patient; [...]

Declaration of Geneva (World Medical Association 2017)

(a) To improve the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities by supporting the pursuit of clinical excellence and high quality patient care, clinical practice, education, and research for general practice. [...]

(j) To advocate on any issue which affects the ability of members of the College to meet their responsibilities to patients and to the community.

RACGP Constitution November 2025

Preamble:

I would in many ways make a terrible RACGP President, as the role is currently conceived. But although I'm right behind most of what the College does (and have been an examiner and Medical Educator in my time) I'm not seeing the College break free from its shackles on dissent to speak out on some key ethical red lines our society appears to be crossing. And crossing at increasing speed. All the red lines have an impact on our ability to live up to the personal and public vows we have made to be advocates as well as practitioners, and hence I believe they are a legitimate and urgent concern for the College in 2026. If any of the other candidates seem up for taking the big risks demanded by our extraordinary times, and have more College/governance experience than me, you should probably vote for them. Likewise, if you need to tactically vote to avoid an alternative worse than me, please also do so.

Amble:

Remember when you first thought about medical school? Perhaps you were dreaming of saving the world (or at least a few patients), being a trusted leader, having a stable and respected job, following in the family footsteps (or blazing a new path). And how, after graduation (and likely swearing to uphold a version of the Declaration of Geneva) things just got more and more complicated?

Even in good times medical ethics can be gnarly. So much balancing - the need to make a living versus the imperative to serve humanity, confidentiality versus societal

responsibilities, being the confident expert versus awareness of uncertainty. But we find our safe space, and settle in.

And our College supports us in this, providing a sense of being part of something, striving to be better, helping to protect us from our detractors, encouraging and facilitating our professional development.

Our College does a great job of supporting the present and advocating for incremental change towards a better future. But, like all our public institutions, it has evolved within a system of constraints on any significant deviation from supporting a status quo defined by powerful political and corporate forces outside its control. And even the College's limited freedom is constricting. Speaking out now carries significant personal and institutional risk and each week seems to provide new examples of politicians and the corporate media attacking anyone with the courage to be off-message.

And the on-message is increasingly at odds with what we signed up to as doctors. Fewer protections for the vulnerable or non-conforming. Criminalisation of dissent or protest. Weakening or removing controls on environmental destruction. Beating the drums of war. De-immigration. Denying indigenous history and struggles. Attacks on women's health rights.

It is a testament to how far this has already progressed that we can look at this list and realise it is now safe to publicly promote these ideas and plans but instinctively know it is dangerous to openly oppose them.

Even if our own lives seem to carry on peacefully, we can hear the growing sounds of violence all around us. Distant atrocities livestreamed to our phones. Voices closer to home stirring up hatred for the vulnerable. Heatwaves, floods, droughts, crop failures. The sound of a police state under construction by a powerful friend, who may expect that Australia follows suit.

Can our leaders rise to the challenge of the times? We all hope so. But what we hear is silence, or dissent presented so carefully that it is just a louder form of silence. We hear politicians justifying their inaction with half-truths and distractions, the media simplifying and juicing up complex issues to generate anger and outrage and clicks and revenue. Corporations trying to buy access to our law-makers to enable them to outsource the costs of their plunder to future generations.

We can get a taste of the end goal by looking at the USA, who we seem keen to follow. Without any effective internal opposition the USA government is dehumanising and targeting vulnerable groups with violence, establishing what can only be described as concentration camps, attempting to control free elections, using state resources to target political opponents, awarding taxpayer-funded jobs and contracts to its friends, waging permanent wars overseas, and eroding women's rights to healthcare. This is not a recipe for equity and good health.

How will we as doctors be able to function when this kind of regime takes control here? Which patients will be denied care? How will we deal with the casualties of war, or of environmental chaos? Will we be required to notify any pregnancy to the authorities in order to support a complete ban on abortion? What will happen to us if we try to speak out or disobey orders?

This is not a future I want, and I know it isn't the future most of us want. But it is the future we will get if we continue to be silent. As doctors, as GP's, we have a lot more ethical and moral authority than we realise. Time to use it.

Post amble:

I should highlight the fact that this statement, and my candidacy, is not endorsed by any organisation with which I am currently involved, either as a member or casual supporter. There are some great organisations and groups out there for doctors inclined to support good things and resist bad things. Here are three with accessible websites which might help you understand my main interests and motivations (but there are also plenty of direct support options for conflict zones such as Ukraine, Sudan, Palestine/Gaza, easily findable via a web search): Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia) <https://www.mapw.org.au/about/> Doctors for the Environment Australia <https://www.dea.org.au/> Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) <https://msf.org.au/>.