



Community service — or conscription?

To the Editor: I write to you on the controversial matter of community service, now that there is talk of extending it to 2 years.

The State invests money in universities because it knows that in the future it will need the skills of the graduates, and that it will reap the rewards of its investment over the working life of the graduate. Therefore, to hold that the student somehow owes the State is a fallacy, because as stated above the State will reap the benefits.

The student on his/her part invests intellectual capital and time in the venture and does this also with a view to future reward.

From the State's point of view it is merely a financial investment. For the student the time spent at university means that he loses income for a period of 6 years. When he does qualify his insurance premiums will start at a higher notch because of his age and he will have incurred considerable debt in the form of loans should he not have wealthy parents, or conversely, the parents have contributed a large sum of after-tax money to the exercise (not only tuition fees but also living expenses have to be met).

Originally the Minister tried to infer that new graduates needed more exposure and experience before going into practice, but this was clearly an excuse to get cheap labour as these young people are sent to remote areas where there are no senior people to give guidance, so the experience gained is a matter of hit and miss.

New graduates worldwide tend to look for places where they can gain experience. Years ago places like Baragwanath attracted young doctors from all over the world for that reason.

Instead of complaining about our young graduates leaving the country we should be asking ourselves why they are going. We should be looking more at the carrot and less at the stick.

In my opinion any new graduate who has incurred study debt and does not go abroad is out of his mind, because with the exchange rate being what it is one can pay off debt within a year. But why are they not coming back? Many do come back, let's face it — compared with the UK with its NHS and foul weather South Africa is a much better option. But when they do return they avoid the public service. Why?

I firmly believe that to reverse the trend and encourage young people to stay here we must work on the carrot and not the stick: improve working conditions in the state hospitals, encourage senior people to join or stay on after retirement (working in an academic environment is possibly the most rewarding type of practice), improve working conditions, offer tax incentives, make it possible for people in outlying areas to

stay in contact with the academic institutions, and link posts to the latter institutions.

It is a tragedy that senior people with a wealth of hands-on experience are lost to the country. I believe that upgrading the peripheral hospitals and getting senior staff will attract young graduates not only from South Africa but from other countries as well.

At present community service is nothing more than conscription, and conscription is only a means for politicians, either bereft of solutions or trying to implement policy that does not merit popular support, to impose their will. Conscription is an invasion of the rights of an individual, forcing him to do something against his will. I am sure that were it to be tested it would fail the scrutiny of our constitutional court.

Why only medical people, why not every school leaver and graduate — is this not also discrimination? Samuel Johnson once said, 'To appeal to people on the grounds of patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel'.

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ACLS and PALS examinations 'sold' unnecessarily to doctors for work in the UK

To the Editor: It is with regret as well as a strong sense of responsibility that I inform you that some of the advertisers in the SAMJ have benefited by creating the false impression that certain examinations (ACLS and PALS) are compulsory in order to work in the UK.

These sometimes high-profile companies state that these examinations are compulsory in order to enter the UK as a doctor. Their price tag is almost R4 500 and these courses have to be renewed every 2 years. The UK General Medical Council (GMC) has confirmed that *only* registration with them is necessary in order to work in over 95% of UK hospitals, or eventually to register as a GP. Other considerations are the need for GMC registration, tax implications, length of contract and working conditions, as well as tens of thousands of rands that could potentially be claimed from candidates should they default on their agreement.

BUFA (35 hospitals), Nuffield (32 hospitals) and a few other private hospital groups similar to our Mediclinics in South Africa form a minute part of the medical arena (roughly 200 - 300 posts) compared with the majority of better-paid and