

Letter to the Editor

University of Auckland Postgraduate Diploma in Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine

At the 2023 SPUMS Annual Scientific Meeting Professor David Smart presented an outline of current Australasian diving medicine education. This has prompted me to summarise an alternative that existed in the early 2000s that failed to establish permanently. In 2002, a Postgraduate Diploma in Medical Science – Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine (DHM) was established by Professor Des Gorman in the Department of Occupational Medicine, Auckland University Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences. This was a one-year-full-time or two-year-part-time distance learning programme which could be undertaken as a stand-alone diploma or incorporated into a Master's degree, for instance, in occupational medicine. I was appointed to deliver this course. The programme consisted of five papers which included an initial obligatory one on the physics and physiology of hyperbaric environments. In addition, candidates could choose which papers on diving medicine, hyperbaric medicine or a research project to undertake to meet the completion requirements of the course.

Each taught paper consisted of a series of weekly Power Point (PP) lectures as a pdf, combined with a background Word file, pdfs of key publications and other recommended reading. For some topics, there was a set of questions to answer with feedback provided. The university had limited face-to-face and videoed lecture capacity at that time, so regular interactive discussions were done largely by email Q&A. Each course was examined at the end of its semester. The project paper was assessed twice, the initial proposal and design and the final dissertation, by an external examiner and me. One of the elective papers had an experiential component at an approved hyperbaric medicine unit in Australasia.

About 16 doctors qualified, from NZ, Australia, the UK and Oman, whilst five did not complete the programme for various reasons. The course was recognised by the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) for their Certificate in DHM as an alternative path to that of the SPUMS Diploma. Indeed, at the time Professor Gorman proposed the diploma's establishment, he envisaged that it would replace the SPUMS Diploma and provide a formal academic degree for DHM. The course was terminated by the university in 2007, along with most other medical postgraduate diplomas.

Several reasons contributed to this failure, but three in particular. Firstly, uptake was limited despite over 100 enquiries internationally. Whilst New Zealanders and Australians received government grants, candidates from other countries had to pay the full university fee as though they were 'in residence' and utilising all the facilities of the campus, which was a considerable sum. This put off the majority of international enquirers!

Secondly, after four years the course was reviewed by a professor of education from Auckland University of Technology and an academic DHM physician from Australia. They were only provided with the PP & Word files and not made aware of the numerous interactive components that had been used. Unsurprisingly, their comments were less than favourable! An important linked issue was that the university would only look at the numbers of Diploma students graduating. The number of these was small because most of the students were either doing the DHM papers as part of a Masters in Occupational Medicine or switched from a diploma-level degree to one of Master of Medical Science by dint of possessing a clinical post-graduate qualification such as a Fellowship of the ANZCA or the Australian College of Emergency Medicine (FACEM), etc. The assessing board refused to consider these students as course graduates so our output looked minimal!

Thirdly from my personal perspective, SPUMS failed to recognise the potential benefits of having a university degree in diving and hyperbaric medicine and, thus, as a professional organisation did not provide support, although individual members did so strongly as honorary faculty. In the long run, the ANZCA-based qualification appears to be providing the better option anyway, as described by David Smart in his presentation.

So what of the graduates? Six became hyperbaric medicine unit directors at some stage in their careers; another is regarded as one of the most experienced and respected physicians in primary diving medicine in Australasia, whilst readers of the *SPUMS Journal* and *Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine* have benefitted from the publication of articles based on five of the theses written for these degrees. For me, it was a wonderful academic experience and made me some good friends.

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