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RANZCP elections: What becomes of the disengaged?

Dear Sir,

As a membership organisation that is responsible for the accreditation of medical specialist training and ongoing peer review in psychiatry for Australia and New Zealand, the RANZCP needs to represent its members, as well as to uphold standards of medical expertise to serve the healthcare of the community. The effectiveness of the RANZCP as a membership organisation depends on member engagement.¹ An objective and quantitative measure of membership engagement is voter turnout in organisational elections.

We comment regarding the voter turnout of the 2023 RANZCP election for President-Elect. The RANZCP reported that 37% of eligible members voted in 2023, while 35% voted in 2021, and 39.9% in 2019 (college emails). Low voter turnouts occurred despite the RANZCP sending reminders, candidate profiles and other measures to encourage voting. Therefore 63% of members, a clear majority, did not vote for their binational leader, who represents their discipline on the national and international stage, as in previous elections.

Our unsystematic search did not find any research literature on medical specialist college voting, or details on voter turnout for similar elections for other specialist colleges. Acknowledging that general population election voting rates are determined by many more factors than the RANZCP election, it remains apposite to consider that voter turnout of 37% is comparable to the Presidential voter

turnout in the lowest ranked countries for voting (105–107), Bulgaria at 38.7%, the Central African Republic at 35.3% and Nigeria at 34.8%.² Without assuming that any similar socio-political issues exist, as an objective measure of membership engagement, such a low voter turnout represents very substantial disengagement.

Medico-political organisations, such as specialist medical colleges, like the RANZCP are most effective when members are engaged and active in volunteering. Disengagement means that the RANZCP is less representative of its members views and interests. Disengagement renders such organisations vulnerable to the perils of corporatisation, bureaucratisation and concentration of power.³

Therefore, the RANZCP should investigate the member engagement and the reasons for voter disengagement, including:

1. Surveying members anonymously through peer-review groups, sections and faculties as to reasons for voting or not – with the caveat that disengaged members may not respond;
2. Quality audit of the governance of the President-Elect nomination, election campaigning, voting and communication policy to ascertain if there are impediments to voter engagement.

Voter turnout for the 2023 RANZCP election for President-Elect demonstrates disengagement. The College needs to act to understand and address

disengagement, which threatens its viability as an effective membership organisation.

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Ethics and consent

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