

# Mind the gap, says doctor

By Kyra Gillespie

Pakenham Secondary College is the first school in Cardinia to have a resident doctor after being selected to participate in the Victorian Government's Doctors in Secondary Schools program.

The school is one of 100 across Victoria to be chosen for the first stage of the program.

"We are very pleased to be one of the pioneers of the Doctors in Schools program in our region," Pakenham Secondary College Principal Ray Squires said.

"Making healthcare more accessible to students will no doubt have a positive impact on their wellbeing," Pakenham Secondary College Principal Ray Squires said.

Renowned general practitioner Dr Ferghal Armstrong from Black Fish Medical Clinic in Koo Wee Rup was welcomed to the college in late August and is at the school each Thursday to provide free access to primary health care for secondary school students.

The adolescent-trained GP will provide students with the same services that are normally provided by GPs in the community including seeing students about their physical and mental health and sexual and reproductive health issues.

Dr Armstrong is passionate about helping young people with their health needs.

"I have a desire to care and a desire to educate," Dr Armstrong said.

With years of experience under his belt, Dr Armstrong knows the healthcare issues young people are facing.

"The need for a service of this nature is quite acute in this area," Dr Armstrong said.



Pakenham Secondary College has welcomed Dr Ferghal Armstrong as part of the Doctors in Secondary Schools initiative. 172961  
Picture: STEWART CHAMBERS

Of particular concern to Dr Armstrong are the fee gaps for prescription medications.

"How on earth can a 14-year-old possibly come up with the money for something like antibiotics when they don't work and don't have access to a car?"

"There's nothing in place yet to address that problem."

Dr Armstrong referred to other centres such as the Koo Wee Rup Community Hub which was receiving funds from local charities and clubs to fill that cost gap for young people who are unable to earn a wage and pay for their own medication.

"It's early days, but that's something we could look into doing here in Pakenham."

Limited access to a Medicare card is also among the list of things that Dr Armstrong hopes to improve for young people through the Doctors in Secondary Schools Program.

"I saw a child last week who has been living with her best friend's family because the issues at home are so severe.

"The parents are completely out of the picture.

"This young girl has had to transition from being a child to an adult very quickly.

"Having access to a Medicare card would make life so much easier for this student and others in similar situations."

Pakenham Secondary College Wellbeing Leader Yvette Sangster is thrilled to have Dr Armstrong on board.

"This is such a positive development for the school, for the kids and for their families," Ms Sangster said.

"There's a whole range of reasons why some families aren't able to give their children access to primary health care.

"Sometimes their work schedule means that they are simply too busy to fit it in.

"There are some families who don't know how to approach a doctor or how to go about healthcare matters.

"It can be a scary process.

"Some kids have to take on the role of being the parents themselves due to various factors in their households, such as parents who suffer from mental and physical health issues."

Ms Sangster emphasised that the program is designed to help parents, rather than undermine them.

She highlighted that while parental consent is not required for mature minors, the GP and Wellbeing team will often encourage students to involve parents in their care.

Mature minors are students under the age of 18 years who are deemed capable of seeking and obtaining health care for their particular medical issue.

The GP will assess if a student is a mature minor on a case-by-case basis with respect to the issue for which they are seeking medical treatment.

Like Dr Armstrong, Ms Sangster emphasised the need for the program for young people in the area.

"In the past three days we've had a case of homelessness and a couple of incidences of domestic violence.

"Just in the past three days," Ms Sangster said.

Since the program is still in the early stages at the school, Ms Sangster and Dr Armstrong's primary focus is on making sure all students are aware that the program is up and running.

"We want the students to know that the service is finally here for them to use, and to know that we are here for them."