



YOUNG

Cultivating and establishing a new and early-career special-interest group (NESIG) in Australia and New Zealand

Creation of a special-interest group that is geared towards young and early-career members of a workforce requires three key ingredients: members who are motivated and engaged; opportunities to network; and cohesive, organised effort. As it turns out, these themes have been coming to the fore in early-career discussions among young medical physicists in different corners of Australia and New Zealand (NZ) in recent years. In mid-2021 the first two ingredients came together to light the spark that would become the new and early-career special interest group (NESIG) for medical physicists and scientists who are members of the Australasian College of Physical Sciences and Engineers in Medicine (ACPSEM). I had the privilege of being part of this experience and I am happy to be able to share some insights into the formation of our NESIG.

The foundations of the group were laid in NZ, months before the inception of the group. Through the efforts of motivated early-career members there and the support of the NZ branch committee, the first steps were taken to begin to formulate a plan. In parallel to this, recognition was increasing across the Australian and NZ medical field of the importance of early-career medical physicists. This evolved into conversations about provision of more support for these workers, and ensuring that they were represented on different committees, boards and working groups. To this end, early-career and registrar medical physicists were invited on to committees, professional standards boards and working groups.

In the relatively small workforce of medical physicists across Australia and NZ, networking has been a key tool in the development of the NESIG. One of the major steps that moved the establishment of the NESIG forward was the building of communications by a senior leader in the field, who sent an email that connected early-career physicists together. This email was sent to those who had informally expressed interest in and motivation to take part in something like a NESIG. This initial interest sparked conversations among peers from a variety of backgrounds. These conversations connected members across the two countries who had begun preparations for and discussion on a NESIG-type group and who allowed their efforts to be combined with those of the newcomers. An informal online meeting was organised. Those who attended were asked to forward the concept of the group to their peers and anyone who they thought might be interested in supporting the development of the group. These steps would later become the source of resources and documentation that would be required to start a special-interest group.

Starting a young and early-career interest group required more than interested members and good intentions. It was decided during the early stages of the NESIG formation that a collective voice would be the best way to put the case forward to the medical physicists' college, the ACPSEM. Senior staff members of the college advised on the best way to move forward and a strategy was developed. To ensure the success of the operation, it was decided that a letter of proposal from interested young and early-career medical physicists, with other supportive signatories, would be drafted and sent to the chief executive of the ACPSEM. The letter listed reasons why it was felt that the group would assist with improving professional standards, levels of collaboration, and services of the entire ACPSEM workforce through the empowerment and inclusion of young and early-career members. The letter requested provision of details of the correct avenues through which to pursue this concept and outlined why formal ACPSEM support for this cause would be beneficial. The document also included an explanation of the concept of the group, including a main overview, group structure and potential activities that the group would support.

These ideas were established from the first, small group discussion over Zoom and provided evidence to the chief executive that initial development of the group concept had been thoroughly considered before the request for approval had been put forward. The efforts to put this together paid off, and a meeting was organised with some group representatives and the chief executive to discuss how to proceed. From this stage, the timing was key as the annual Australia and New Zealand conference, Engineering and Physical Sciences in Medicine (EPSM) 2021, was due to take place in the months following the initial discussions regarding formation of the NESIG. This enabled some interested members to create communications to spread the word about the new special-interest group (Fig 1).



Figure 1 - NESIG poster created for 2021 EPSM conference to spread the word on the newly formed group

As good governance practice suggests, the benefits of any new initiative should be assessed to ensure they outweigh the costs of the work and effort required before proceeding. Roughly 25% of radiation oncology medical physicists have fewer than five years' experience [1]. In the diagnostic imaging medical physics cohort, the figure is approximately 28% [2]. Therefore, a significant proportion of the workforce could benefit from a group such as the NESIG. Since November 2021, more than 30 young and early-career members have expressed interest, through a LinkedIn group. Also, the number of volunteers who have expressed interest in contributing suggests there is sufficient buy-in from the workforce.

In December 2021, those involved in the foundation of the NESIG formally sent out a call for leadership. Once these roles are filled and a leadership team is established, the agenda for the next 12 months and beyond can be determined. Throughout this period, support from other established groups has been positive and ideas for collaborative efforts are already being investigated.

To finish with some advice for any early-career scientists out there: If your governing body has a group for early-career professionals, join it. If they don't, start one! The three-ingredient recipe outlined in this article works a treat. Coming together with like-minded peers who you can relate to is a powerful thing and it will make the formative years of your careers all the more memorable for doing so. We are all so lucky to have had the opportunity to be educated in this field and to work in an exciting, evolving and expanding career space – let's make the most of it.

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