



**What is Podiatric Surgery?
Who are Podiatric Surgeons?
What is the Australasian College of Podiatric
Surgeons?**

THE AUSTRALASIAN COLLEGE OF PODIATRIC SURGEONS

PO Box 248, Collins Street West, Victoria 8007

Telephone: +61 3 9268 1888 Facsimile: +61 3 9268 1880 Email: podiatric.surgeons@rsmi.com.au

What is podiatric surgery?

Podiatric surgery is a specialist field in the podiatry profession in most western countries, including Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. Podiatric surgery is defined as *“the surgical treatment of conditions affecting the foot, ankle and related lower extremity structures by accredited and qualified specialist podiatrists”*.

Podiatric surgeons are concerned with the diagnosis and treatment of disorders of the foot and ankle. Podiatric surgeons are qualified to care for bone, joint, ligament, muscle and tendon pathology of the foot and ankle, generally restricted to:

- Structural deformities, including bunions, hammertoes, painful flat foot and high arch deformity, bone spurs
- Heel pain
- Nerve entrapments
- Degeneration and arthrosis of the joints of the foot and ankle
- Skin and nail conditions
- Congenital deformities
- Trauma-related injuries, including fracture and dislocations and post traumatic arthrosis

Podiatric surgeons have been practising in Australia since 1975. They are podiatrists who have undertaken extensive specialised postgraduate training and education in podiatric medicine and surgery. Podiatric surgeons work within the framework of the modern multi-disciplinary healthcare team with general practitioners, specialists and other health professionals, to provide safe and appropriate clinical care for foot, ankle and lower extremity conditions.

In the United Kingdom, where podiatric surgery is well-accepted within the government-funded health system, podiatric surgeons have recently developed educational ties with the Royal College of Surgeons.

What is the ACPS?

The Australasian College of Podiatric Surgeons (ACPS) is the peak body responsible for

the training, accreditation and monitoring of the practice of podiatric surgery in Australia. The ACPS is affiliated with the Australasian Podiatry Council (APodC).

Various government agencies have legislation or regulations that also recognise the activities of Fellows of the ACPS in Australia. These include State Podiatry Registration Boards and the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. The Private Health Insurance Ombudsman is specifically obliged under Commonwealth law to ensure podiatric surgeons can deliver services in accord with relevant legislation and regulations.

What does it take to be a podiatric surgeon?

Becoming a podiatrist in Australia currently requires a 4 year undergraduate Bachelor of Applied Science majoring in podiatry from an accredited podiatry program at an Australian university. Graduates of this program are then registered as practising podiatrists according to individual state legislation.¹ Qualified and registered podiatrists are able to diagnose and treat pathology of the foot and lower limb and are legally able to use local anaesthesia to perform skin and nail surgical procedures.

Podiatric surgical qualifications are a post-graduate speciality of the podiatric profession. Before attaining a podiatric surgical fellowship qualification, a podiatrist must complete an extensive training program, including:

1. Bachelor of Applied Science degree, majoring in Podiatry (4 years)
2. Minimum of 2 years post-graduate clinical practice
3. Master of Podiatry (2 years full time university degree)
4. A 3-stage surgical fellowship training under supervision of the ACPS (4 to 6 years)
5. International residency training (usually in the UK and USA)
6. Demonstrated mastery of knowledge in foot and ankle surgery by passing oral and written examinations administered by the ACPS

The process is rigorous and transparent and overseen by the ACPS via an examination panel comprising practising podiatric surgeons and members of the medical and pharmacy professions.

The ACPS has developed as a paramedical specialty outside of the medical model of provision of surgery in Australia. This is similar to the dental model of surgery in Australia. That is, podiatric surgery has developed from a foot specialty profession, whereas 'Foot and Ankle' orthopaedic surgery has developed foot surgery as a speciality from the general medical profession.

¹ The Federal Government is currently working with the States on arrangements for a national system of registration of health professionals (current as at May 2007).

Where is podiatric surgery performed and how is it covered?

Podiatric surgery is performed in private practice, community health centres, day surgery centres and some private and public hospitals within Australia.

The professional fees of medical practitioners providing foot surgery are rebated under the Medicare system. Funding is provided by the Commonwealth and the States for the training of surgeons with a medical background. Neither applies to podiatric surgery. These two factors are of significance and have directly restricted the growth of podiatric surgery in Australia when compared to the development of podiatric surgery in other countries.

There is no legal or funding barrier to podiatric surgery occurring in public hospitals.

To operate in licensed day surgery and private hospital facilities in Australia, credentialling and accreditation processes require a Medical Advisory Committee (MAC) to approve the suitability of a registered health professional to perform surgical procedures in the facility. MACs throughout Australia accredit podiatric surgeons to work in licensed facilities.

At the Federal level, changes to legislation in recent years mean that procedures performed by podiatric surgeons in private hospitals attract coverage from private health insurance funds. There is no change to the way in which podiatric surgery is carried out or administered. Private health insurers offer rebates for aspects of surgical services provided by Fellows of the ACPS. These rebates cover theatre fees, bed stays in private hospitals and the costs of implantable prostheses such as pins, screws and plates.

The *Health Insurance Act* and the *National Health Act* include podiatric surgeons in the same category as medical practitioners for the purposes of hospital admission. Hospital treatment provided by podiatric surgeons is to be treated under applicable benefit arrangements *“as they would if a medical practitioner provided a professional service.”*

State Government legislative arrangements supporting podiatric surgery

Several states have legislation allowing the use of restricted and/or controlled medications to be prescribed by podiatric surgeons, and recently (2005) the NSW Government amended legislation to ‘support’ the practice of podiatric surgery in that state. Essentially, the NSW Government removed a restriction which had prevented podiatric surgeons from working in private hospitals on the basis that they were not medical practitioners.

What are the benefits to Australia's health system and taxpayers from podiatric surgeons?

A number of Commonwealth and State committees of inquiry into medical workforce issues in recent years have found that moving Australia's healthcare model to a team of medical professionals and allied health professionals would make more effective use of existing, often scarce, skills while saving the taxpayer.

For example, a Productivity Commission study on COAG's National Reform Agenda released in February 2007 found that there was potential for a 5 per cent improvement in the productivity of health service delivery which, if achieved, would increase GDP by 0.4 per cent. This 5 per cent improvement could equate to additional resources to spend on healthcare of around \$3 billion.

Other benefits – workforce and otherwise:

- Improved patient care through the ongoing clinical management by a podiatric specialist, and choice of provider
- Reduction in orthopaedic waiting lists – demand will continue to increase as a result of an ageing population and an increase in osteoarthritis risk factors such as obesity.
- Reduction in foot amputation rates – important for patients with diabetes
- Shorter training period for podiatric surgeons because of greater exposure to foot surgery and patient management
- Improved recruitment and more stable workforce of podiatric surgeons in the health system
- Cost reduction as podiatric surgeons perform many procedures using local anaesthesia where appropriate