

Article:	Fake doctor Balaji Varatharaju sent to jail
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AN "overachieving and altruistic" man who was not a qualified doctor but treated up to 400 patients at Alice Springs Hospital will spend at least 14 months in jail.

Balaji Varatharaju, 29, pleaded guilty in the Northern Territory Supreme Court to three counts of forgery, three counts of criminal deception and one count of aggravated assault.

Justice Jenny Blokland said Varatharaju's actions had undermined the public's trust in the provision of medical services in the Northern Territory.

"Few people would deceive in this way," she said.

Varatharaju was arrested in February after it was discovered he had been working as a general intern, under the supervision of senior doctors, but had never completed a medical degree.

The court heard the NT medical board was of the belief that Varatharaju had completed a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery at the University of Adelaide in South Australia. However, when concerns emerged about Varatharaju's lack of clinical knowledge and his inability to insert a cannula, the medical board discovered the certificates, as well as an academic reference, were forged.

Varatharaju had been enrolled in the six year medical degree, but was expelled for forging a senior lecturer's signature on a research paper and for attempting to change an E-grade into a B-grade.

Justice Blokland said the NT medical board now routinely cross-checked all qualifications with the relevant institutions as a matter of course.

The court heard Varatharaju instead graduated with a Bachelor of Health Science, but failed to gain employment in the field.

Justice Blokland said the Singaporean came from a very high-achieving family and suffered from back pain, depression and bipolar disorder. She said Varatharaju, who volunteered at the Red Cross and in aged care facilities, was motivated to overachieve and became overwhelmed when he took on too much.

"The type of deception you indulged in would take significant confidence and audacity," she told the court.

"The relationship between your mental state and the offending is not entirely clear.

"You were motivated in your fraudulent activity to help people in the community rather than hurt anyone.

"That altruism needs to be moderated."



Varatharaju treated more than 400 patients at the hospital over a period of 10 months. The court heard at least one of Varatharaju's patients was now wary and scared of going to see a doctor.

Justice Blokland said patients treated by Varatharaju would "rightly feel violated".

Varatharaju was sentenced to two years jail with a non-parole period of 14 months, including time already spent in custody.

The NT government failed in its bid to have Varatharaju pay back the \$64,000 he earned while working at the hospital.

Varatharaju was, however, ordered to pay restitution of \$1065 in relation to motor vehicle stamp duty, which he avoided paying by forging registration documents.

It is not yet clear whether Varatharaju will be deported when his jail sentence is complete.