

DOCTORS CALL FOR ACTION TO PREVENT SUICIDE IN THE MEDICAL PROFESSION

Final Report of the *National Forum on Reducing Risk of Suicide in the Medical Profession*

The Final Report of the *National Forum on Reducing Risk of Suicide in the Medical Profession* – jointly convened by the AMA and Doctors' Health Services Pty Ltd (DrHS) in September – was released today.

The Report records the considerations and recommendations of 82 doctors – nominated by key medical stakeholder organisations – from a forum that examined the individual, organisational, and environmental issues that impact negatively on the emotional health and wellbeing of doctors.

DrHS Chair, Dr Janette Randall, said that the Forum was a day of impassioned conversations about issues that deeply affect the medical profession and individual doctors, from medical school through to retirement.

“The themes that emerged from the day were culture and compassion. We heard stories of psychological harm, mental illness, and suicide, which are the sad and tragic reality of the pressures of being a doctor in Australia today,” Dr Randall said.

“Importantly, we also heard stories of how doctors at the coalface are working on solutions to protect their own health, the health of their colleagues, and their patients.

“The strong overarching message from the Forum was that cultural change has to come from within the profession and doctors must care about and value the health of their colleagues.”

AMA Vice-President, Dr Tony Bartone, said there are many factors that can affect how doctors and medical students cope with the stressors of their work roles.

“Not enough doctors and medical students have a GP who they see regularly, and not enough doctors engage in preventive health care such as healthy lifestyle, proper work-life balance, and regular check-ups – simple, yet vital, actions that can keep stress and depression at bay,” Dr Bartone said.

“The stress can build up over time and, in worst-case scenarios, can lead to self-harm and suicide.”

The facilitator of the Forum, Professor Simon Willcock, Clinical Director of Primary Care at the Macquarie University Health Sciences Centre, said that doctors do not currently recognise and respond to illness in themselves or their colleagues.

“Across the profession, we have to get better at seeing the signs when matters like ageing, burnout, compassion fatigue, traumatic events, bullying, and harassment are eating away at our colleagues and ourselves,” Professor Willcock said.

“These things affect our health and wellbeing and our effectiveness as doctors, and ultimately can affect the quality of care we are providing our patients.”

Doctors' Health Services Pty Ltd commits to the following actions in partnership with State providers:

- Lead the development of a Consensus Statement on Doctors' Health to which the medical profession can commit their support. This will be a public statement of our intent to make the health of our profession a priority.
- Develop and make widely available education on how to be a 'doctor-patient' and how to treat medical colleagues when they are patients. This work will be based on the recently developed Australian Doctors' Health Network curriculum on doctors' health.
- Provide advice, support and clearer pathways to assist all doctors to find their own GP.
- Increase efforts to provide support to colleagues 'at risk', such as those facing regulatory issues, those with mental health issues and other chronic illnesses, and those exposed to critical and distressing incidents. This will be achieved by continually improving access to doctors' health services, and by working with other agencies to support their responses to doctors and medical students with specific needs.
- Develop a communication plan that shares key messages from the Forum report with the whole profession, and work with key stakeholders to ensure that these messages are strongly reinforced over time to drive cultural change.

Next Steps:

- Early in 2018, the Doctors' Health Services Pty Board will re-engage with each of the stakeholders to get their feedback on the Forum report, and seek their organisation's interest in developing the top five actions in doctors' health.
- In the first quarter of 2018, a 'Patrons' group of interested stakeholders will be formed. The role of this group will be to champion doctors' health, promulgate key messages among their professional sector, support key initiatives, and contribute resources where required to support implementation of the Forum's recommendations.
- Over the next one to two months, develop a communications strategy to ensure that the great ideas and messages from the Forum are shared with the profession, and support an ongoing conversation about doctors' health.

The Final Report is at <https://ama.com.au/article/national-forum-reducing-risk-suicide-medical-profession-final-report>

* Doctors' Health Services Pty Ltd is a subsidiary of the AMA and is funded by the Medical Board of Australia. It was formed in 2015 to establish the first national health program for doctors and medical students in Australia.

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CONTACT: John Flannery 02 6270 5477 / 0419 494 761
 Maria Hawthorne 02 6270 5478 / 0427 209 753

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