

Medical Board of Australia consultation on the funding of external doctors' health programs

Submission received from: **Name withheld**

Question 1: Is there a need for health programs?

Do you see any value in, or need for external health programs for medical students and/or doctors? Please explain your reasoning

There is a very large need for external health programs for doctors for a range of reasons. Rates of stress related biopsychosocial illnesses are endemic in our society, and there is significant cross-sectional evidence reflecting higher than average rates of mental illness, substance use & physical consequences of work related stress in medical practitioners. Furthermore, hospital and practice culture may make individuals feel isolated, or 'weak' for experiencing these issues, though highly prevalent, and deter them from early help-seeking, thus perpetuating high risk situations rather than diminishing them.

As mentioned, programs should suitably exist as external non-board entities that work collaboratively so as to avoid apprehension from individuals in help-seeking (for fear of repercussion ie. losing registration). As most presenting problems exist on a spectrum of severity rather than as discrete entities, the board could rely on program practitioners to assess risk to individual & community, & make suitable recommendations about capacity for safe practice, as they are bound under law to do so.

Additionally, the very presence of such programs, especially as they are made available to junior doctors & students, fills a previously large care-provision hole & acts to educate individuals about the normal experience of stress, identify issues within themselves, and de-mystify the currently taboo topic of mental health amongst practitioners.

Question 2: Preferred model for external health programs

Of the existing models in Australia as described above, is there a model that you would prefer to see adopted nationally? Is there an alternative model that you would like to see adopted nationally?

The VDHP provides an excellent model primarily through

- options for individuals, ie. face to face contact, phone services, rural outreach*
- case management & follow-up based on nature of issue*
- local knowledge (as non-service providers, referral to suitable practitioners/allied health of suitable ideology, experience & sensitivity is essential)*

Question 3: The role of the Board in funding external health programs

Do you believe that it is the role of the Board to fund external health programs?

Subjectively, many junior doctors would agree that the direction of their registration fees is not clear, and many would assume that their use is primarily administrative. The existence of a non-punitive, doctor run, health/education/research program as a tangible resource should be considered an essential part of support provided by the board, especially given the relatively small cost per individual, significant evidence base for the need of such a program, and the presence of similar programs in professions of similar nature.

Question 4: Range of services provided by doctors' health programs

What services should be provided by doctors' health programs. In addition to the ones you have selected, what other services (if any) should be provided by doctors' health programs?

Telephone advice available 24/7

Referral to expert practitioners for assessment and management

Develop and maintain a list of practitioners who are willing to treat colleagues

Education services for medical practitioners and medical students to raise awareness of health issues for the medical profession and to encourage practitioners and students to have a general practitioner

Case management and monitoring (including workplace monitoring) the progress of those who voluntarily enter into Case Management agreements (or similar) with the service

Follow up of all participants contacting or attending the service

Assistance in finding support for re-entry to work and rehabilitation

Research on doctors' health issues

Publication of resources – maintaining a website, newsletters, journal articles

Other services (please list)

Question 5: Funding

How much of an increase in registration fees is acceptable to you, to fund doctors' health services?

>\$40

Question 6: Other comments

Do you have any other comments or feedback about external health programs?

Ultimately, the presence of health issues within doctors is real, common and serious, and the factors precipitating, perpetuating & preventing help seeking are different from those affecting, for example, a commercial pilot.

Its within the interest of the entire community and well as the individuals to create a culture that promotes evidence based understanding & insight into these factors and appreciates the benefits of EARLY intervention. The board would be acting for the benefit of all by supporting the existence of DHPs; as a case of classic primary prevention.