

Will I be reported for seeking help?

Support services for doctors are vital lifelines in times of stress. But how will the changes to mandatory reporting legislation affect these services? By AMA Victoria Peer Support Service Program Coordinator Kay Dunkley and Victorian Doctors' Health Program Medical Director Dr Kym Jenkins.

Doctor assistance programs

In Victoria, medical practitioners seeking assistance have the following resources available to them.

AMA Victoria Peer Support Service

The Peer Support Service provides anonymous and confidential support over the phone for the cost of a local call. All calls are taken by trained volunteers who are experienced doctors. The service offers a point of first contact and a listening ear and assists callers take the next step in resolving their situation.

Anonymity protects both the caller and the volunteer and enables frank discussion of all issues. The aim of the Peer Support Service is to empower the caller to make an informed and appropriate decision in relation to the situation the caller is facing.

The Peer Support Service may be reached at 1300 853 338, from 8am to 11pm, on any day.

AMA Victoria Doctor Support Service for members

AMA Victoria offers its members face-to-face peer support by linking a member wanting direct support with a trained volunteer who is also a doctor. The support includes situations such as investigations, audits, legal and disciplinary procedures, workplace disputes or health issues. The service includes linking members with a support person for court cases or board and tribunal hearings for example, and a companion for the road during periods of prolonged stress or during recovery.

The aim of the Doctor Support Service is to support members – whatever their particular situation. The service by definition is not anonymous; however the member would determine at every point the nature of support they need.

Our counsellors are required to keep any information disclosed strictly private.

The Doctor Support Service may be reached at (03) 9280 8722, from 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday.

Victorian Doctors Health Program (VDHP)

The VDHP is a service provided to doctors and medical students who have concerns about their health, and who may need help with addressing problems such as stress, mental health issues, substance abuse, or physical health issues. The service is conducted with the utmost discretion – VDHP staff are especially sensitive to the needs of doctors and medical students, and provide a private, non-judgemental service dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of those within the profession.

As well as offering assessment and triage of problems, advice and information and ongoing support, the VDHP can also work with participants to develop individual management plans and coordinate treatment, including arranging appropriate referrals to external treatment providers.

The VDHP can be reached at (03) 9495 6011, from 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. Outside those hours a member of the clinical staff is always on call for urgent advice.

Relevance of mandatory reporting requirements

New mandatory reporting requirements for health practitioners came into effect on 1 July 2010 and guidelines have now been released by the Medical Board of Australia to assist practitioners in their obligations to report other practitioners. There is a high bar for reporting. Our November 2010 *vicdoc* included a comprehensive article detailing these requirements.*

In summary the *Health Practitioner Regulation National Law (Victoria) Act 2009*, sets out 'notifiable conduct' that warrants mandatory reporting of a health practitioner who has:

- practised while intoxicated by drugs and/or alcohol
- engaged in sexual misconduct in connection with the practitioner's practice
- placed the public at risk of harm because of a significant departure from accepted professional standards
- placed the public at risk of substantial harm because he or she has an 'impairment'.

Concerns have been raised about the effect of mandatory reporting on doctors who need to access services when they require assistance with health, substance abuse or other issues. In particular, mandatory reporting has been viewed as a disincentive to doctors seeking assistance and treatment.

It is important to bear in mind that the mandatory reporting requirements are triggered by a significantly high bar, meaning that only very specific categories constitute notifiable conduct.

In fact, despite initial anxieties that mandatory reporting requirements would make doctors and medical students less likely to seek help, at VDHP there has been no significant change to the number or nature of contacts both by phone and in person.

We encourage doctors to use the doctor assistance programs in any circumstances where they are required.

* Any member requiring a copy of this article can contact AMA Victoria on (03) 9280 8722.