



WARDS OF PRIVATE PAIN

Some of our most talented young medics open up about why they're hitting breaking point



JENNA CLARKE

Marko Mandic decided stabbing himself would be more effective

than drinking cleaning liquid to escape his unrelenting workload and frequent 16-hour shifts.

"I kept thinking 'I've got good veins, I know how to do it so I don't bleed out', but even then I didn't think it would be enough to be able to go home," he told *The West Australian*.

The young doctor had been sitting on the toilet crying uncontrollably for an hour during a shift at Royal Perth Hospital's general medical unit when he tightened a stethoscope around his arm and held the cold needle of a catheter against his skin.

"I just kept thinking that I was the only one going through this, the only one feeling this way and the only one not being able to do their job."

He was wrong.

Like many of his peers Dr Mandic, 26, graduated near the top of his high-school class, then from the University of Western Australia's prestigious medical school and was flourishing in his first couple of months as a doctor according to his superiors. He was also wrong about being the only junior doctor experiencing feelings of helplessness, severe anxiety and depression.

Medical professionals are more likely to die by suicide than any other person.

Data shows female doctors

are 2.2 times more likely to take their own lives and male doctors 1.4 times.

Twenty per cent of young doctors, like Dr Mandic, experience suicidal thoughts. But a cluster of health professional suicides since 2017 in addition to the 369 who took their own lives between 2001 and 2012 around Australia have sparked calls for systematic cultural change within the medical profession.

Instead of harming himself, Dr Mandic contacted Royal Perth Bentley Group's doctor's wellbeing officer Rich Read.

The pair had been in contact previously but by the second term of his internship Dr Mandic said he was consistently questioning his abilities and dealing with dark thoughts.

"It was all just a bit much,"

he said of the time when he was working back two hours every night.

Putting in overtime just to get across a variety of patients with complex illnesses as well as maintaining all of their paperwork and assisting consultants from various medical specialities.

Dr Mandic met with Dr Read for a coffee before signing up to take part in the



inaugural peer group service run by RPBG. It has now become a cornerstone of the Junior Doctors Wellbeing Program which officially launched earlier this year.

The purpose is to provide mental health support for doctors just out of university as they begin their careers. Help is available in group settings or confidentially.

The program is the first of its kind in Australia.

Ahmed Kandil, 26, was also a part of the 2017 peer group. He was working 7am to 10pm in the State trauma unit at RPH at the time.

"I felt as if I was under water. I was consistently getting home and falling asleep in my clothes with the lights on before waking up and having to do it all over again," Dr Kandil said.

The final straw was when he fell asleep while driving from Bunbury to Perth after an orthopaedic surgery shift and crossed three lanes of traffic.

"It was 5am and I sent an email to Rich, he got back to me straight away and suggest we meet up within 24 hours. It really helped having someone tell me that it wasn't just me feeling alone and there are plenty of people who think they are doing a bad job when in reality that might not be the case," Dr Kandil said.

After spending about a decade working in government law Andreana Manifold, 40, decided to become a doctor but it wasn't long before she was noticing an internal shift.

Attendance to the peer groups, which are facilitated

for eight to 10 doctors at a time, is voluntary and participants are given extra days paid leave by the hospital for taking part.

Peer groups involve cheese boards, training exercises and the opportunity to build a support network.

They also provide a safe place to learn how other doctors deal with the pressures of the job including when patients die, when they work 10 days straight and survive on less than four hours of sleep.

"For the first group in 2017 we had 30 per cent of the class saying yes to taking part. In 2018 we had a 60 per cent sign up rate and this year we're at 85 per cent," Dr Read said.

"It's educational and preventative. We don't pick up the pieces after people crash. We give doctors a tool kit they can continually use.

"It's not about focusing on problems, it's about how they respond to problems on the wards, surgery or ED."

The WA Doctor's Health Advisory Service helps facilitate the group sessions. Sarah Newman is the assistant director of this 24/7 Lifeline-type service for medical workers, an independent organisation she helped set up after being hospitalised for depression in 2013.

After not being able to get out of bed and needing to take nine months off work for her recovery she is now a successful general practitioner. She chose to share her mental health struggles and experiences with senior doctors a few years ago and many officials now credit her for generating cultural change at RPH.

"Our jobs are not normal which is why these groups are so important. It involves a certain amount of stresses and learning how to acknowledge those stresses and to deal with those so they don't become things you take into your professional and personal lives," Dr Newman said.

The initiative has received huge praise from the medical industry.

"The medical profession is very tough and high suicide rates, issues with alcohol and bullying and harassment from senior doctors to juniors is rife, but this program aims to tackle all of this head-on instead of sweeping it

under the rug," Australian Medical Association WA president Omar Khorshid said.

"In this year's hospital health check survey Royal Perth did substantially better than last year when it comes to the welfare of junior doctors."



Weekend West
Saturday 27/4/2019
Page: 6
Section: General News
Region: Perth
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 1,443.00 sq.cms.
Frequency: -----S-

Brief: AMA-AM
Page 3 of 5



Doctors Ahmed Kandil, Marko Mandic and Andriana Manifold with wellbeing officer Dr Rich Read. Opposite page: WA Doctor's Health Advisory Service assistant director, Sarah Read. Pictures: Mogens Johansen







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Page 5 of 5

