

THE AFTER EFFECTS

Doctors can do better to support their colleagues who are at the receiving end of a complaint

The psychological impact of a complaint made against a doctor must never be overlooked and can never be understated.

Nearly all doctors feel extreme anxiety on being notified about a complaint, even if they have done nothing wrong.

Dr David Oldham, Medical Director of the Doctors Health Advisory Service WA points out that several other associated strong feelings could also surface.

"These include feelings of guilt if the doctor thinks they may have contributed to patient harm; feelings of shame if the doctor has been unprofessional; feelings of anger if the complaint appears vexatious; and feelings of embarrassment if the complaint is made public," he says.

Dr Oldham believes the number of notifications against doctors is on the rise given the ease with which a complaint can be lodged – an email or phone call to the Medical Board, a grievance on a doctor's website or even a disgruntled post on social media.

"Most doctors I speak to are very concerned about how easily a malicious public complaint can be made against them.

"Even if the complaint turns out to be unfounded, a long-lasting stain can appear on the doctor's reputation.

"It would be easy for me to say 'don't worry about it, sh*t happens!' However, that sort of comment doesn't help,"

Dr Oldham says.

"All the doctors I have met worry about complaints, often lose sleep and sometimes become quite depressed. Some even cease practice, or change practice as a result."

For Dr White,* a senior GP based in Perth, who on several occasions successfully defended allegations made against him via the regulatory authority of AHPRA, the effects have been life-changing.

Dr White switched to part-time work in a bid to reduce his professional exposure to what he feels is an increasingly litigious society. The angst and resignation in his voice is evident.

"I have no trust in AHPRA's ability to regulate. They are unreliable, unprofessional and inconsistent," he says.

"I feel bullied and even though I want to hit back, I can't as I

have been understandably straightjacketed by my MDO."

Dr White's advice to doctors who receive a notification is not to take it personally and to write a response immediately.

"Contact your MDO, pass on your response to them and then follow their advice to the letter," he says.

While it is normal to be anxious, upset, angry and embarrassed, Dr Oldham emphasises the importance of separating the "incident" that the complaint is about, from the "person" against who the complaint is made.

"Good people make mistakes. A bad mistake does not mean you are a bad person or a bad doctor. All doctors make mistakes."

Dr Oldham says the medical community needs to be more supportive, empathetic and non-judgemental of colleagues.

Usually a doctor who has had a complaint made against them would have paid a heavy price, with feelings of guilt and self-loathing. Often their family would have also been affected – they may have been subject to whisperings from families of medical colleagues, or in the event of a public complaint, unwanted attention from friends, strangers and sometimes the media.

Secondly, the doctor may have been subject to several layers of disciplinary action including hospital, legal and coronial processes.

"By the time they return to work, such doctors have usually been well and truly punished (formally and informally) and simply want to get on with life in as painless a way as possible," Dr Oldham says.

"Offering simple words of support are the most effective. For example, 'it's good to see you back', 'let me know if I can help you'.

"It's also good for close colleagues or supervisors to keep a close eye on the doctor, and if they seem to be struggling, ask if they are okay.

"The effects of a complaint, even a seemingly minor one can be devastating, and to know that your friends and colleagues are behind you is crucial to recovery," Dr Oldham says.

*This is a real case but the doctor's name has been changed to protect their privacy.