



COVID-21 – preparing for the next phase

Health workers have another year of challenges ahead and **Dr Sarah Newman** urges doctors to look to their own health as a priority.

In early 2020, we anxiously awaited the COVID-19 pandemic, the brunt of which was averted in Western Australia. But the absence of community spread only partially alleviated the stress on the medical community – it was still a hard year for health workers across the public, private and training sectors.

Last year highlighted the critical role of healthcare worker wellbeing in patient care. Although avoiding the worst-case scenario and preparation for further outbreaks, the downstream workplace, financial and other direct and indirect stressors of COVID-19 are leading to burnout, anxiety, depression and stress reactions.

So, what will this year, an era of COVID vaccines look like? How do we prepare ourselves for the uncertainty of 2021?

First, we need to do the basics, ensuring our own physical and psychological safety. If nothing else, get vaccinated against COVID-19 and influenza. We are only as good as our infection control. We need to have proper PPE when at work, to avoid work when unwell, and to get tested if we have any symptoms – multiple times if necessary. Have a plan for your household should you catch the virus. Sleep, exercise and diet are also important in preventative self-care.

Psychologically, we need to feel open to discuss our concerns and fears, and workplaces need to be safe spaces for discourse. Peer-to-peer discussion and mentoring may be useful. There are also online supports available specifically for healthcare workers, and our website lists some COVID-related doctors' health resources.

Think about experiences and relationships that revitalise, invigorate and sustain you. These are more important than ever for burnout management. Include emotional, social, physical, spiritual and vocational elements into your schedule – plan them into the week,



maybe even write times for them in your diary. Also, consider how you might meet your self-care needs in a lockdown.

If time-poor, consider outsourcing tasks to give yourself more breaks or leisure time – be it workplace or at home. Cleaning, meals, laundry and shopping are easy examples.

Chronic conditions increase the adverse outcomes of COVID-19. We recommend annual health checks for all doctors – it's never been easier to access your regular GP with telehealth. If you need some help finding a doctor, psychiatrist or psychologist, refer to our website's Doctors for Doctors list.

The public will look to doctors for advice and guidance and we need to encourage calm evidence-based care. Large volumes of data on COVID-19 are emerging every day. It can be overwhelming for doctors and patients alike, as fear of the unknown and misinformation breed stress and anxiety.

Upskill in your role in the current vaccination phase. Seek education from accredited sources, and avoid anxiety-provoking lay press and social media. The RACGP and WAPHA offer credible resources for community clinicians.

The way we think and act matters.

Firstly, be kind to yourself, as stress is a normal reaction to upheaval and uncertainty. Concentrating on what we can control in our lives gives us mastery in the unknown. Focusing on the present moment deters worries and ruminations about uncertainty. Some people find mindfulness and meditation useful stress busters.


Find gratitude in your day and demonstrate kindness with colleagues. We need collegiality because workplace incivility causes distress and harms patients.

➤ continued on Page 45

COVID-21 – preparing for the next phase

➤ continued from Page 43

Thinking in 'black and white' misses many useful perspectives. Self-reflection exercises may reveal or help develop personal or professional growth with COVID-19.

If your feelings of stress, exhaustion, dismay or disengagement are uncontrolled, reach out for help early. Draw on your personal support network of friends, family and colleagues. We encourage your GP as a secondary resource. If you want to speak to a doctor for doctors, call our 24/7 anonymous, confidential advice line. There is also a free national confidential telehealth counselling service for doctors and medical students provided by DRS4DRS (drs4drs.com.au). 

ED: Dr Newman is assistant director of the Doctors Health Advisory Service WA www.dhaswa.com.au. 24/7 advice line is 9321 3098.



The public will look to doctors for advice and guidance.

Practice insurance. Done right.

With over 30 years of industry experience, we deliver insurance the right way.

As one of Australia's leading insurance brokers, we gain a complete understanding of your situation and how we can protect you against everyday risks.

Your experienced day-to-day account manager will be able to guide you through our extensive services covering **Practice Insurance, Management Liability, Practice Indemnity, Cyber Insurance** and Personal Insurance, giving you the ultimate piece of mind at all times.

Call today to get the right policy for your needs.



 **professional**
ESSENTIALS

PART OF
THE BRUCE
INSURANCE
GROUP



1300 303 793

professionalesentials.com.au