

Celebrating a dedicated career in doctors' health

Dr Barry Fatovich reflects on his experiences and life philosophy in an interview with Dr Britt Suann

Dr Barry Fatovich is a GP with a special interest in palliative care and doctors' health. He joined the Doctors' Health Advisory Service of Western Australia (DHASWA) in 1998. With 25 years' experience in doctors' health, Barry works on the DHASWA advisory telephone line, which was first created for Western Australian doctors in 1988. He is a remarkable person, wholly dedicated to both patients and peers, and I was privileged enough to have the opportunity to interview him.

Dr Britt Suann, DHASWA Group Advisory Member

What drew you to working in doctors' health?

Originally tapped on the shoulder to work for the 'Colleague of First Contact (WA)' in 1998, Barry's commitment to providing support for WA doctors has been indefatigable.

"It is a tremendous privilege to care for other doctors... to be able to be helpful to colleagues. And also, to expand their perspective a bit," said Barry.

"Often patients will have a problem, and we can't fix it. But just having someone to talk to makes it better."

Being a fellow doctor who intricately understands the WA Health system, Barry provides an empathic, listening ear for doctors feeling wholly overwhelmed by their situation, which helps to alleviate distress.

What's an important message you'd like to share about doctors' health?

"My gut feeling is not enough doctors have a GP. I have been aware of a number of doctors over the years who have either dropped dead or died by suicide. I don't know if they had their own GP, but I feel that it might have made a difference, had they had a person whom they could have regular contact with.

"A lot of what we do with doctors' health is connecting people with a regular health service."

Barry strongly encourages practitioners to have their own GP, who might then refer them to psychologists and psychiatrists through his work on the DHASWA 24/7 advisory line.

On why doctors don't always seek early and regular help, Barry said, "We are so used to people coming to us (doctors) for help, that when we are going to someone else for help, it almost doesn't feel quite right. This is something we have to acknowledge and work through."

How has working in doctors' health changed over the past 25 years?

"We used to get one call a month, but now it's closer to one call a day. I think this is due to awareness." As doctors have advocated for safer working hours, flexible training options and access to mental health support, the awareness for doctors' health has drastically changed.

"There is a cultural change that we need to look out for ourselves. But there is a tension between looking after oneself and looking after others." It's a constant challenge to find that balance.

And on finding a way to strike that elusive balance, Barry said, "Part of the challenge is we have to try as hard as we

can with what we are doing, and then we have to let go. I have been looking after people for a long time, and I still constantly worry about the people I look after. But you have to deal with what's in front of you right now, and then let go. I'm always battling with reminding myself of this. It's about living in the present moment."

What advice do you repeatedly give when you talk to doctors in distress?

"It's about looking after yourself, and things like exercise, avoiding alcohol and other drugs. It's important to do things that you enjoy – like dancing, going out with friends, or whatever

works for you. Every year, for the last 20 years or so, I have done a one-week retreat. No phone, no internet, no TV, no radio – to centre myself and to read thoughtful literature.

"If we're right, then the world can be right. It's a constant balance between the things we do for others, and our need to look after ourselves."

We also discussed how it is important to consider how working in an overstretched health system can make it extremely difficult to maintain good mental health and wellbeing.

"Often people will be working long hours which makes it [good mental health and wellbeing] hard.

"There are many medical groups in difficult situations. For example, the doctor who is working, managing a family and juggling many hats, and the GP who has moved to a remote area and not realised how isolated they might feel."

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Health & Mental Health Minister Amber-Jade Sanderson, Caroline Morling, Dr Barry Fatovich and DHASWA Medical Director Dr Helen Wilcox: at the presentation of the Jonathan Morling Doctors' Health Champion of the Year Award (the DHASWA Award).

In the end, Barry feels that staying true to yourself, letting go of what you can't control, and learning how to check in with yourself are some of the key drivers to a fulfilling career in medicine.

"A magnet always points to the true north. Within ourselves, we have a magnet that points in the direction of what is right for our lives. The busyness of the day-to-day can make it difficult to find this direction. Make sure you have the time in your life to listen to that soft inner voice. As the saying goes: *you have to listen to your heart, it whispers softly.*"

Conclusion

Barry is a warm, caring and dedicated person who has committed his extraordinary career to providing a listening ear to patients and peers who have needed it. His reflections allow people the perspective and space needed to tackle some of life's most difficult challenges, including career, wellbeing, life and death.

We are all under immense stress, and often it is frustrating how little control we have over our situations. Barry's philosophy makes the assumption that life is hard, and decidedly unfair at times, but happiness can lie in finding your 'true north'. If we can find stillness, reflection and balance within ourselves, we all have the potential to enjoy the tremendous privilege that is a medical career.

Full of adages and life experiences, incredible references and humility, it was a great pleasure to interview Dr Barry Fatovich. ■