

The Hon. Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health
Via email: Greg.Hunt.MP@aph.gov.au

Submission for 2020-21 Federal Budget

Supporting Australian medical students' mental health and wellbeing

Executive Summary

The Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training program is an internationally recognised course developed in Australia, which has been specifically adapted for health professional students. The feedback from student participants and universities has been overwhelmingly positive, with evidence showing the training leads to improved knowledge, skills and abilities for the participants.

The prevalence of mental health issues is a significant issue, with one in five Australians aged 16-85 suffering a mental health illness each year, and nearly half experiencing one during their lifetime. Over 3,000 Australians lost their lives to suicide over the last year. It is also known that medical students experience higher rates of distress and mental health diagnoses in comparison to the general population and other university students^{1,2}.

Promoting mental health and wellbeing has been one of the cornerstone commitments of the current Australian Government. Starting in 2012, the Australian Government has consistently provided funding to MHFA Australia to cover the cost of enrolling medical and other health professional students in the online component of the MHFA course. Due to the significant demand for the program, these funds were exhausted earlier than planned and are no longer available.

Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand (Medical Deans) and the Australian Medical Students Association (AMSA) request that the Australian government provide \$815,000 additional funding to MHFA over the next 3 years to enable the online component of this valuable training to remain freely available to Australian-based medical students. This figure has been calculated using the estimated 2020 medical student commencement figure of 3,881, assuming each student accessed the course once during their medical program, and the current cost per student of \$70, thus equating to \$271,670 per year. The associated MHFA face-to-face training would continue to be funded by the medical schools or alternative means.

We also strongly recommend that funding be provided to MHFA Australia to convert the course materials to an electronic format. This would significantly reduce costs in the longer term and dramatically cut the level of resources involved in the printing and shipping of materials to course participants. We urge the government to work with MHFA Australia to develop a funding commitment and plan to enable this as soon as is possible.

¹ [National Mental Health Survey of Doctors and Medical Students](#)

² [Prevalence of depression amongst medical students: a meta-analysis](#) (Puthran, Zhang, Tam, & Ho, 2016)

A clear need for this training

Data indicates that 45% of Australian adults experience a mental disorder during their lifetime, with one in five Australians aged 16-85 suffering a mental health illness each year. In 2017, over 3,000 Australians lost their lives to suicide.

It is because of these heartbreaking numbers and the personal stories associated with each one, that mental health is a core aspect to Australia's new Long Term National Health Plan announced in August this year by the Federal Health Minister, the Hon. Greg Hunt.

The level of psychological distress reported by medical doctors is significantly higher than the general population and other professionals, especially so for younger doctors. Similarly it has been shown that medical students experience higher rates of distress and mental health diagnoses in comparison to the general population and other university students^{3,4}. Medical students have also reported gradually higher depression scores over the course of their medical education, and that this continues into the workforce.

Supporting medical students to develop the necessary knowledge and skills to look after their own mental health and wellbeing, and be able to recognise and support friends and colleagues who develop mental health problems or experience a mental health crisis, is vital. Increasing the emphasis as well as the opportunities to learn skills and strategies to build strong self-care habits and become alert to the signals of deteriorating mental health within themselves or their friends and peers, has been a key priority of medical schools, mental health organisations and government over the past number of years. Medical schools invest substantially in teaching their students the skills of self-care and how to maintain their wellbeing during their career in a profession which is so demanding on one's physical and mental health. This course is one of an array of initiatives that supports students – particularly in the early stages of their training – to the different ways one can identify and address a person in distress.

The guiding principle in health care is that providing education to prevent or treat a problem at an early stage is the best approach as it invariably minimises harm and is the most cost effective strategy.

It should be noted that MHFA is very distinct from the formal teaching and learning of psychiatry and mental health within the medical program curricula, and does not replace this in any way. Medical students are encouraged and supported to undertake the MHFA training in their first year or two of medical school, which provides them with effective grounding in being able to recognise and respond in an informed manner to mental health issues they experience themselves or come across within their cohort. The experience is that the MHFA training course complements and reinforces the value of the student health and wellbeing services and supports provided by medical schools, provides an early and practical foundation to the issues where students and their peers are at increased risk, and adds to the formal curriculum that they will be exposed to later in their medical program.

³ [National Mental Health Survey of Doctors and Medical Students](#)

⁴ [Prevalence of depression amongst medical students: a meta-analysis](#) (Puthran, Zhang, Tam, & Ho, 2016)

The MHFA training course is a blend of online learning, followed by a half-day face-to-face facilitated training component. After the participants have completed both elements, they are able to undertake an online Accreditation Assessment to receive a Mental Health First Aider Certificate of Accreditation valid for three years. During the course, participants learn about the signs and symptoms of common and disabling mental health problems, how to provide initial support, where and how to get professional help, what help has been shown by research to be effective, and how to provide first aid in a crisis situation. Areas covered include anxiety, depression, self-harm, substance abuse, eating disorders and psychosis.

Whilst MHFA has received further grant funding from the Department of Health from 1 July 2019 for a range of new suicide prevention initiatives, this does not have an allocation or scope for the continuation of the subsidised tertiary program, despite the high level of demand and evidence of its positive impact. MHFA Australia CEO, Ms Shannon Anderson, has been consulted on this submission and confirms the organisation's strong support.

The value of the course

The mental health and wellbeing of medical students is a priority for all medical schools, who take very seriously their responsibility to support their students and ensure they have a solid foundation of knowledge, skills and behaviours to support and sustain them throughout the stressors of medical training and a medical career. There is a strong focus on developing effective self-care habits, navigating the stresses of medical training and medical practice, and developing the knowledge and skills to support their friends, colleagues and patients who experience mental illness.

Beyond Blue's National Mental Health Survey of Doctors and Medical Students found:

"Addressing stigmatising attitudes, particularly in medical students early in their career, could not only remove a potential barrier to doctors seeking appropriate treatment for their own mental health issues, but also improve their ability to provide high standard care for patient with mental illness, and to influence attitudes towards mental illness in their patients and within the community."

A wide range of approaches and initiatives are taken by the various schools – for example, many hold a range of workshops and resources during student orientation and the early weeks at medical school; support programs developed and led by student bodies, to reduce any concerns about confidentiality; enable access to health and counselling services; provide dedicated support for students at increased risk of mental health stresses; employ dedicated student support advisors; develop specific and accessible supports and services for students away from the main campus, for example those undertaking a rural placement; and provide and promote a wide range of targeted workshops, peer mentoring programs, and skills-based learning around mindfulness and self-care. In addition, a wide range of information, strategies and skills are embedded across the schools' curricula.

The MHFA training program has been an extremely successful and valuable addition to the range of initiatives a university can offer their medical students to prevent deterioration of their mental health and or burnout.

Most importantly, there is clear evidence that this training delivers meaningful and practical skills for medical students to support their peers and themselves in an era where the mental health and wellbeing of students is under pressure. Staff at one medical school noted that the training helps students identify issues in themselves as well as their peers and equips them with the skills to both speak up and ask for help, and to encourage and support others to seek help as needed.

The MHFA course has been recommended by the Australian Medical Student Association as a means of providing medical students with the knowledge and skills to assist people who are developing mental health problems or experiencing a crisis. The training is also provided to students in leadership roles, recognising the importance of advocating for good mental health as well as the pressures placed on students moving into these roles.

Given the MHFA course is already well-established and has been evaluated as effective on more than one occasion, providing this training to all medical students is an efficient approach and supports consistency across the whole medical student body. Should medical schools be asked to absorb this additional cost, it will come at a time where university funding has persistently been cut whilst they are increasing their investment in quality regional and rural teaching experience for a greater proportion of medical students, continuing investing in educational innovation and effectiveness, and prioritising expenditure on a wider range of student support measures.

Evidence that MHFA works

Training medical students using the MHFA resources is evidence-based, and we advocate for this to be an essential part of the national strategy to combat mental health problems, substance abuse and suicide. The feedback from students who have access the course has been uniformly positive, as has that of the academic student support leaders:

"I found the mental health first aid crucial. It has helped me with one particular situation in my own life already, and I feel I wouldn't be alone. I also feel it'll be even more useful when we're in the hospital. I really do think it should be kept in the course." - Year 1 medical student

"I thought it was absolutely fantastic and should definitely be included next year. We are an at risk population and I think it helped remove stigma in the group I did it with. I also think the tools will be very useful in our future practice. I know of several students (including myself) that have used these skills." – Year 1 medical student

"I personally felt benefited by the mental health first aid. I wasn't aware of many mental health issues and the sensitivity around this topic before the course, but I do know this now. It also helped me understand the ways in which I could approach people going through depression/anxiety which can be a pretty tricky thing." – Year 1 medical student

"As a clinical academic with responsibility for student self care, MHFA is an excellent resource for medical students to develop their skills in managing their own and others mental health problems, nothing else comes even close to it." – Associate Professor

An evaluation of the effectiveness of the tailored MHFA course for medical and nursing students was completed and published in 2015 and again in 2018. The 2018 study, which included almost 6,000 participants, found MHFA training led to:

- improved mental health first aid knowledge,
- improved recognition of mental disorders and understanding of treatment effectiveness,
- some reduction in stigma, and
- increased confidence in helping a person with a mental health problem

The 2015 study found that the course improved peoples’ attitudes towards other students experiencing depression, improved confidence in providing help to them, and that stigma and desire for social distance from those with depression were reduced⁵.

The Australian Government makes a substantial and essential investment through Commonwealth Supported Places to enable medical schools to train Australia’s future doctors. Previous Government support for this program sent a strong signal to medical students and the medical profession overall, that the mental health and wellbeing of Australia’s doctors is a priority to not only support the profession, but the broader Australian community by helping to enable a stable, well and resilient medical workforce.

The return on investment to government, the medical workforce and to the community, would be substantial from this funding. Not only does it align with the Government’s commitment to support the mental health and wellbeing of those who support Australians every day, it equips medical students with the essential skills to support their peers and alleviate pressure in an already challenging and resource-constrained context.

The provision of this funding allows the Government to demonstrate its commitment to improving mental health and wellbeing, providing a practical and tangible example of how your Government’s work in the Health Portfolio has supported Australia’s future medical workforce, with the flow-on impact of helping to support all Australians.

Funding requested to 2022

Assumptions: 3,881 students per year (based on estimated 2020 commencement figures)
\$70 per student (based on \$50 cost/student, plus \$20 pp for course materials)

	2020	2021	2022	Total
No. students	3,881	3,881	3,881	11,643
Cost of course/student	\$70	\$70	\$70	
TOTAL	\$271,670	\$271,670	\$271,670	\$815,010

Contact

Should you have any queries or would like to discuss this request, please contact Ms Helen Craig, CEO of Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand, on 02-8084 6557 or hcraig@medicaldeans.org.au

17th December 2019

⁵ Bond,K., Jorm,A.F., Kitchener, B.A., Reavley, N.J. (2015) Mental Health First Aid training for Australian medical and nursing students: an evaluation study. BMC Psychology doi: 10.1186/s40359-015-0069-0