

Addressing The Issues

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Chair of the Wellbeing Committee

The pressure we place on ourselves and the pressure that is placed upon us as barristers cannot be underestimated. Our profession is attended by perfectionism, the anxiety of being on display - either in the courtroom or in the conference room - and the attendant fear of being questioned on something we do not know the answer to or humiliated by admonition by an opponent or a judge. Further, it is an environment in which many of us have clients who are living through the worst times in their lives and our job is to advise them, protect them, help them and advocate for them. They are relying on us.

In order to get work, we must have impeccable reputations for strength, integrity, hard work and professional judgment. However, our reputations are sometimes only as good as our last case and mistakes are not forgiven.

We work in isolation, our colleagues are also our rivals on occasion.

We run our own businesses where the financial pressures of dealing with irregular income patterns mismatch the regularity of floor fees and business expenses.

It is no wonder that the level of stress, anxiety and depression in the legal profession is about twice as high as it is in the general community.

The problems are both systemic and self-inflicted.

I write this introduction because I want to dispel any thought that the work done by the Wellbeing Committee is akin to the company social club. The work that is done is focused and important. I believe that the projects initiated by the Committee over the last 6 years has been integral to the increased awareness of mental health issues, and has not only opened the door to have those discussions but has taken genuine, practical steps to address those issues at both the cause and effect level.

A key objective of the Wellbeing Committee is to take steps to mitigate the impact of vicarious trauma. Each year the Committee hosts a seminar which helps barristers to detect the symptoms in themselves and their colleagues, and provides them with the means of prevention and intervention.



In that same strain, the Wellbeing Committee has created a discussion group, called the 'Safe Place', where barristers may meet and ventilate matters of concern to them, in a confidential setting.

The Wellbeing Committee commissioned The Black Dog Institute to provide mental health training for members and that is being done over the next 6 months.

With the aim of increasing the use of BarCare services, the Committee has this year undertaken to improve the BarCare website. One of the key impediments to accessing BarCare services has been the doubts or suspicions held by barristers that if they access the services, that information will not be kept confidential. However, one of the basic tenets of BarCare is that all such information is kept confidential and no-one in the Association is given any information that would identify the persons accessing the services. The Committee has delivered the 'confidentiality' message on regular occasions but it needs to do more. In addition, many barristers are unaware of the wide variety of services that can be provided by BarCare.

The Committee has interviewed a number of established barristers to gain their insights on how they have coped with the tension and responsibility and the recordings of those interviews are available on our website.

We have looked to some of the causes of stress by providing greater insight into and openly discussing judicial bullying. We have liaised with the Judicial Commission and

done presentations at judicial conferences. In that regard, our work has been done concomitantly with the introduction of judicial protocols by most of the Courts and Tribunals. One of the most interesting outcomes of our research work is that judicial bullying emanates from a very small number of judicial officers. In any one court or tribunal, there are only a handful of judicial officers whose conduct is the source of complaint. The vast majority of judges and tribunal members are held in high regard by our members.

We have also looked to our own habits and the EAT SLEEP MOVE program has provided informative, interesting and targeted webinars on nutrition, resistance strength, posture. We have run mindfulness and meditations training sessions which are particularly needed.

Our efforts at increasing collegiality and interconnection are run through the Bench and bar Lunches, Bushwalking Group, Sporting Teams, the Knitting Club and the soon to be run Dog Day Out picnic where barristers and their canines can meet. We have also recognised the importance of ensuring that our members acknowledge the long and valuable service of our most Experienced Barristers and the lunches honouring their services meant that we could hear the stories of their careers including both the challenges and the highlights.

These are only a few of the many projects undertaken by the Wellbeing Committee and I am honoured to be the Chair. **BN**