

Mental Health First Aid First Responders at the Bar

By Emily Graham



In July this year, a dozen people including eight clerks, three barristers and a member of staff of the Bar Association became accredited Mental Health First Aid First Responders following completion of a course provided by *Mental Health First Aid First Australia*. This was a pilot program for the NSW Bar initiated by the Wellbeing Committee in recognition of supporting the mental health and wellbeing of members of the Bar.

The course comprised an online module as well as a half day practical course. It focussed on the mental health of legal professionals.

The training aims to educate participants to recognise signs and symptoms of common mental health challenges including anxiety disorders, depression and suicidal thoughts, psychosis, substance use, gambling and eating disorders.

Our teacher was a trained expert in mental health care services. She had years of hands on practical experience and tips, such



as key questions to ask people in ensuring that concerns about mental wellbeing are addressed sensitively and in a timely manner.

Many of us in the legal profession are aware of the incidence of mental health challenges in our profession. The face-to-face component of our training allowed us to

discuss ways in which to recognise mental health challenges and ways to provide support to a person in need.

Some of the 'risk factors' for mental health challenges are present in the legal profession including at the Bar. For example, high job demand, long working hours, isolation and even workplace conflict/bullying. Even though some of those elements of our practice at the Bar are unavoidable (in particular, the high demands of the job), it is helpful to have an understanding of trigger factors and how they might impact mental health to be better informed to mitigate or address some of those risk factors.

It was particularly helpful for clerks to attend the training. Clerks are frequently an important port of call for floor members for a wide range of needs, including, at times, raising mental health concerns and asking for assistance with obtaining professional help.

Thank you to the Bar Association staff who assisted with organising the



Participants (L to R in photo):

1. Jackie Charles, Clerk, Level 22 Chambers
2. Nora Faulua, Practice Manager, 6 St James Hall Chambers
3. Michele Kearns, Clerk, Martin Place Chambers
4. Karen Mobbs, Clerk, Lachlan Macquarie Chambers
5. Mark Higgins, Barrister, Black Chambers
6. Chris Winslow, NSW Bar Association (now Supreme Court of NSW)
7. Matthew Pickles, Clerk, Chalfont Chambers
8. Emily C Graham, Barrister, Level 11 Garfield Barwick Chambers
9. Michael Watson, Clerk, Level 11 Garfield Barwick Chambers
10. Talitha Fishburn, Barrister, Black Chambers
11. Humeira Ali, Clerk, Family Law Chambers
12. Ryan Coleiro, Clerk, Forbes Chambers

initiative, particularly Rebecca Seraglio and Chris Winslow (who is now working at the Supreme Court of New South Wales).

As a result of the pilot, a recommendation has been made to offer further members and staff/clerks access to the training course in 2023 (and, hopefully, beyond!). Please keep an eye out in *inBrief* for details of when the training will next be provided. In the meantime, if you would like to learn more about the Mental Health First Aid course, please get in touch with the Wellbeing Committee via email, check out the Wellbeing pages on the Bar Association website or see www.mhfa.com.au

Helpful resources for mental wellbeing

If you or a colleague, friend or family member are experiencing mental health challenges or a decline in your mental wellbeing, below are just some of the resources available. In the event of a mental health emergency,

please call 000, your nearest hospital or the 24-hour NSW Mental Health Crisis Number 1800 011 511 (every State and Territory has a Mental Health Crisis Number that can be found online).

Barrister-specific resources

BarCare is an independent, confidential, professional counselling service for barristers and their immediate families. The first consultation is free and members can be referred to appropriate resources from BarCare at any stage. Visit barcare.org.au or contact Jenny Houen, BarCare's director, on 0427 317 958 or jhouen@barcare.org

Barristers' Safe Place, organised by Daud Sibtain SC of the Wellbeing Committee, meets regularly as a confidential discussion group both online and in-person. Members can share their experiences in a confidential, group setting. Please see notifications in *inBrief*

for details of the next Safe Place meeting.

Webinars, activities and meetings organised by Wellbeing Committee and others

In the Members' section of the Bar website, you will find recorded webinars of CPDs to help understand some of the common issues facing barristers, such as vicarious trauma, incorporating wellbeing measures into busy lives at the Bar (see the 'eat, sleep, move' seminars) and dealing with bullying and incivility at the Bar. Helping to combat some of the feelings of isolation felt by barristers, activities such as yoga, bushwalking, knitting, personal training and meditation are organised by the Wellbeing Committee to help us keep active and stay connected with each other. Details are in *inBrief* and on the Wellbeing section of the Bar's website. If you have any suggestions for activities, please contact the Wellbeing Committee. **BN**