Student Based Mental Health Interventions

Australian Medical Schools
Acknowledgements

Report co-authored by Joshua Monester, Susan Lee and Zahra Tasha Wahid of the Australian Medical Students’ Association Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Committee 2013.

The Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Committee would like to acknowledge the support of Benjamin Veness, AMSA President, and Steve Hurwitz, AMSA Advocacy Stream Leader, in the production of this report.

 Formatting: Acheel Kamale and Zahra Tasha Wahid.

For enquiries regarding this report please contact:

Zahra Tasha Wahid
National Project Manager
Student Mental Health and Wellbeing
Australian Medical Students’ Association

e – tasha.wahid@amsa.org.au
a – 42 Macquarie St, Barton, ACT 2600
p – PO BOX 6099, Kingston, ACT 2604
t - @yourAMSA

Published 11 September 2013.

The sources of all information included in this report were Medical Student Society Wellbeing Officers, or in the absence of this position, Medical Student Society Presidents. Information was received via e-mail.
Contents

Welcome.........................................................................................................................................................4
Introduction...................................................................................................................................................5
Method..........................................................................................................................................................6
Highlights....................................................................................................................................................7
Overview of Initiatives...................................................................................................................................8
Medical Student Mental Health Initiatives: Australian Universities.........................................................9
Welcome

In 2013, the Australian Medical Students’ Association (AMSA) adopted a new Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy, which drew attention to the morbidity caused by mental health issues to young people Australia-wide:

“Students are less likely to perform well at university when suffering from mental ill health. Psychiatric illness has been shown to be associated with lower educational achievement, decreased employment, lower incomes and lower standard of living, and studies specifically of university students have found a correlation between mental health problems and poorer educational outcomes, as well as increased impairment and more days out of role... [The] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) data shows more than one quarter (26 per cent) of the 16-24 age group experience a mental health disorder in a 12-month period – the highest incidence of any age group. Anxiety disorders are the most common, followed by substance use disorders and then affective disorders.”

AMSA Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy 2013

Following the introduction of this policy, AMSA established the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Committee in order to translate this policy into tangible and multifaceted action.

One of this committee’s initial goals was to establish an ‘Evidence Database’ which consists of a range of reports focusing on various aspects relating to tertiary student mental health. The following report is one of a set of five that together provide a rationale upon which our committee and others may formulate future endeavours. These reports also play an incredibly valuable role in generating awareness of the current tertiary student mental health context. Consequently, we hope that through a greater knowledge of the facts, our readers will feel empowered to take actions to promote student mental health and wellbeing.

The current report focuses on initiatives targeted to medical student cohorts, in order to facilitate the exchange of ideas surrounding mental health promotion at a grass-roots level. We hope that through this report, such stakeholders may discover new ways in which to promote the mental wellbeing of students, and especially those in the psychologically high-risk profession that is Medicine.

Warm Regards,

Tasha Wahid
National Project Manager
AMSA Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Committee
Introduction

One of the major goals for the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing evidence database is to facilitate a better understanding of the current student mental health picture in Australian Universities. Given that there are approximately 17,000 Australian medical students who comprise the core constituency of AMSA, one of the major investigations conducted by the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Committee concerned the activities of the 20 Australian Medical Student Societies, who are spread across the six states and the Australian Capital Territory.

Medical students in general have several unique defining factors: they face long, stressful days at University or on placement in hospitals; and they are often exposed to a significant psychological burden through the demands of patient interaction. Encountering stress in the form of un-well patients, distressed patients and loved ones, as well as mentally ill patients can all summate to produce this psychological burden which if not managed through effective self-care and psychological strategies can result in challenges to good mental health and well-being.

This report focuses on the current ‘informal’ initiatives run by each of the medical societies, which aim to prevent or ameliorate mental illness in medical students. The report attempts to explore the range of activities offered by the various medical societies, not in order to establish a benchmark, but rather to establish a clear picture of the current mental health strategies in place for Australian Medical Students, by students. Furthermore, the report also seeks to tentatively explore the ways in which medical student societies are starting to respond to the new AMSA policy.
Method

Each of Australia’s 20 medical societies were contacted via email, and asked to report on mental health and wellbeing projects run by the Medical Student Society. The primary contact for each Medical Student Society was the Wellbeing Officer (or equivalent). Where no such position exists, the President and AMSA Representative were contacted. Each medical society was asked to report on:

- Current mental health and wellbeing projects run by the medical society;
- Current awareness campaigns run facilitated by the medical society;
- Past mental health and wellbeing initiatives run by the medical society; and,
- Formal or informal teaching or support services organised by the University or Faculty relating to mental health and wellbeing – that is, activities that were not facilitated by, and were run in isolation from, the medical society.

This report will focus on the initiatives, programs and campaigns run by each individual medical society. It will also state, for each society, whether or not they had a dedicated Wellbeing Officer (or equivalent). From these results, it is hoped that medical societies and other mental health and wellbeing stakeholders can see the variation and different perspectives with which the student representative bodies approach the issue of mental health in medical students.

The information collected regarding formal or informal faculty/university teaching has not been included in this report, as the authors believed that the Faculties themselves should be given the opportunity to report on their activities, rather to rely on details submitted by representatives of the student body. The exception to this was in regard to Mental Health First Aid training, which was offered in some cases by the medical faculty, in others by the medical society, and not at all at other medical schools. If this course was offered in 2013, it has been noted at the end of each medical society’s synopsis.

In their individual reports, some medical societies included details of various sporting events run by the student body. As details of these events were not specifically requested in the initial inquiry, the decision was made not to report on details of sporting events, as it was seen to be unfair to the medical societies which run similar events but did not include it in their report.
Highlights

Below are some of the outstanding initiatives conducted amongst the medical schools.

**Blue Week** was an initiative run by the University of Western Sydney Medical Society (UWSMS), and included dress-up days, music, a Blue Party, speakers, and a week-long stall. It was run in collaboration with Global Health Awareness Western Sydney (the University’s global health group), in direct response to AMSA’s new policy.

The **Students Passionate About Mental Health (SPAMH)** group at the University of Western Australia was the only student-run group with a special interest in Mental Health and Wellbeing. Their regular events demonstrate a passion for ameliorating mental illness.

The **University of Melbourne Medical Students’ Society (UMMSS)** was exceptional in that they were the only society to report having a Queer Group.

Although not a student-led project, **The Marley Report** from the Flinders School of Medicine showed dedication on the part of the Faculty to improve mental illness amongst its students, following a series of suicides from 2010-2012. The **Flinders’ Medical Students’ Society’s (FMSS) wellbeing initiatives complement the Faculty focus on wellbeing.**
Overview of Initiatives

These initiatives intend to raise awareness and reduce the stigma of mental illness within the medical student and junior doctor communities, through exposure to, and discussion of, mental health issues. Certain programs aim to prevent the development of mental health issues or promote early recognition and intervention through fostering a sense of community and support amongst medical students, as well as providing students with necessary skills in mental health first aid. Furthermore, a number of campaigns address issues pertaining to general wellbeing, such as nutrition and exercise, which is important as mental and physical health are closely linked. In addition, it was noted that many faculties and medical societies integrate the philosophy of wellbeing into their other events and curriculum, so that mental health becomes intertwined with general health.

Common initiatives

**Mentoring programs** were widespread and seem to cater to the unique academic and wellbeing needs of medical students. Through these programs – some of which were offered by medical societies and others by the faculties of Medicine – students were provided with support and advice from their older colleagues.

**Wellbeing evenings and workshops** were a common occurrence, and guest speakers were invited to many of these events – most of which were held during an evening. The success of these events appeared to be varied. One disadvantage of these initiatives is that while they deliver a set amount of information to students, there is usually no follow-up.

**Regular events/classes** such as yoga and meditation, have in general struggled to maintain attendance. This is in stark contrast to the popularity of mentoring programs.

A few medical societies provided a list of GPs/psychologists who bulk bill to their students, which further promotes mental health and wellbeing, and increases access for many students who would not be otherwise able to locate these professionals.

Health and Wellbeing Portfolio

Thirteen out of the twenty medical societies included a Health and Wellbeing Officer (or equivalent) on their committee. This in general was associated with other wellbeing initiatives, and indicated a focus of the medical society on student wellbeing.
Medical Student Mental Health Initiatives: Australian Universities

(1) University of Adelaide

At the moment, the Adelaide Medical Students Society (AMSS) do not have current or past initiatives specifically and entirely aimed at promoting student mental health by either the university, medical school or medical society.

The AMSS does not have a dedicated Wellbeing Officer, as no such position currently exists. However, a new Health and Wellbeing Officer Committee position is planned for 2014.

(2) Australian National University

The Australian National University Medical Students’ Society (ANUMSS) have a number of programs currently running. These include: the Student Mentoring Program, which provides a support system for first and second year students, with a focus on those from interstate and/or a non-science background. This program replaced The Wellbeing Retreat, which provided an opportunity for inter-year-level socialisation. The Wellbeing Handbook is a publication produced annually, containing a list of GPs and psychologists who are willing to bulk bill. This handbook also provides a guide to clubs and societies, in order to promote social connectedness.

The ‘No Lights, No Lycra’ event is an evening party conducted entirely in the dark. This initiative is aimed at limiting expectations about physical appearance, and to reduce peer pressure to drink alcohol. ANUMSS also introduced a Meditation Workshop in 2013, which focused on mental health promotion and stress reduction. Finally, the Wellbeing Evening is an annual event that promotes discussion of the stresses of medical school and coping strategies to deal with these stresses.

In addition, ANUMSS currently has a dedicated Wellbeing Officer.

(3) Bond University

The Medical Students’ Society of Bond University (MSSBU) has run the ‘Live Well, Study Well’ initiative for the last three years. This is a whole day event, which highlights student mental health issues and healthy lifestyle promotion. Key speakers and workshops aimed at developing skills such as stress management and meditation are some of the features of this event.
The **e-Peer Mentoring Program** is an email-based initiative currently being trialed. This program involves Medical Student Society members acting as mentors to Year 1 students. Correspondence is via email, and students are encouraged to raise any issues they may have with their mentors. In addition to medical society initiatives, Bond University also offers **Bond University Medical Program Support (BUMPS)**, which is a faculty initiative. BUMPS is a pastoral and academic support service which allows students to book appointments with academic support staff. This service also includes the “**Worry Warrior**” web resource, which provides mental health advice specifically aimed at medical students.

MSSBU currently do not have a dedicated Wellbeing Officer.

**(4) Deakin University**

Deakin Medical Students’ Association (MeDUSA) is currently undertaking formal discussions with the Faculty of Medicine to improve the structure, content and format of the faculty-run course “The Essence of Health Mindfulness Course”. This course educates students about the importance of mindfulness and techniques to incorporate mindfulness into their day-to-day lives. MeDUSA also reported working with the Faculty to facilitate a Mentoring Program, which aims to support students in a holistic way, including addressing mental health and wellbeing and how students are coping with the course. Each clinical school runs its own Mentoring Program individually; therefore each program can vary greatly in terms of content.

Currently, there is a Community-Wellbeing portfolio in MeDUSA, which encompasses the areas of mental health and well-being.

**(5) Flinders University**

The Flinders School of Medicine and Flinders’ Medical Students’ Society (FMSS) has fostered a strong focus on medical student mental health and wellbeing following the suicides of four students/graduates within an 18-month period from 2010-2012. The School conducted the **Marley Report**, which investigated the role of the School, and risk factors for mental illness within the student population. The formal response of the School has been to overtly promote student wellbeing, as well as to develop a culture of rapport between students and staff in order to provide on-going support to students.

Promotion of student wellbeing is being achieved through various initiatives. These include the ‘**Mental Health in Medicine Seminar**’, which was the winner of the AMSA Healthy Body, Healthy Mind Award in 2011. This seminar aims to expose, discuss and accept mental health issues within the medical student and junior doctor communities, and includes keynote speakers, as well as one medical student speaker, who shares their own experience of a mental health condition. The program was very well received by the student body.

*The Wellbeing in Medicine Workshop* has a broader emphasis than the Mental Health in Medicine Seminar, focusing instead on general student wellbeing. The initiative is run as a
series of workshops aimed at teaching coping methods and stress reduction. ‘Mental Health Month’ is a month-long campaign concentrating on general mental health awareness. Supports services are strongly promoted, with links to internal and external support services provided on the Medical Student Society website. A jokes competition is also held during this month.

The Health and Wellbeing Officer at Flinders University is the primary “point of contact” for students experiencing stress, or other mental health issues.

(6) Griffith University

Griffith University Medicine Society (GUMS) currently offers a number of programs aimed at promoting mental health and wellbeing. These include: mindfulness sessions, facilitated by a senior lecturer, which provide students with strategies to alleviate stress and allow for relaxation; Parasympathetic Picnic in the Park, which allows medical students to “get outside and socialise in the sunshine”; the Wellbeing Breakfast, which is a free breakfast provided to medical students to raise awareness for mental health and wellbeing issues; Massage Day which is a day during the exam period where massage therapists are employed to provide stress-relieving massages to students; and finally the yet-to-be-released Wellbeing Cookbook, which highlights the importance of healthy eating and good nutrition.

A dedicated Wellbeing Officer is readily accessible to medical students at the University.

(7) James Cook University

Current initiatives available from James Cook University Medical Students’ Association (JCUMSA) are the Wellbeing Page on JCUMSA website, which contains information regarding nutrition, exercise, and mental health; the weekly “Wellbeing Tips” on JCUMSA Facebook page and Mental Health Week, which last year included a keynote speaker from Headspace, a free barbeque and a masseuse service. This event is yet to be arranged for 2013. Past initiatives have included yoga and mindfulness meditation sessions, which were free weekly yoga classes held at the medical school facilitated by professional yoga instructors and mindfulness meditation facilitated by a local Townsville surgeon. However these sessions were discontinued this year due to poor attendance.

JCUMSA has a dedicated Wellbeing Officer.

(8) University of Melbourne

The University of Melbourne Medical Students’ Society (UMMSS) currently offers mentoring groups, which provides academic support for students dealing with mental health issues. MD Queer Group is a forum open to all students regardless of sexuality, and gives them an opportunity to discuss homosexuality and issues regarding sexual orientation in general.
In the past, UMMSS has run a *Mindfulness Course*, which was a four-week short course in mindfulness meditation facilitated by a psychologist.

Currently, there is no dedicated Wellbeing Officer at within UMMSS.

(9) **Monash University**

The *Student Support Program* at Monash University is one of several programs aimed at addressing student mental health and wellbeing at the university. This initiative is a collaboration between the Monash University Medical Undergraduates’ Society (MUMUS) and the Faculty Student Academic Support Unit (SASU), and involves a series of workshops and seminars delivered by staff and senior students highlighting common issues that face medical students. Themes include ‘*I can’t study*,’ ‘*I’m overwhelmed by content*’, and ‘*Everyone seems to know more than me*’. The goal of the program is to reduce stigma associated with feeling stressed, anxiety and depression.

*Mental Health First Aid Courses* are organised annually by MUMUS for each year level. These workshops are held over one weekend with the intention of providing students with the necessary skill set to recognise and deal with mental health problems in themselves and in those around them. The course highlights the fact that mental health issues are often noticed by those closest to the individual dealing with mental health problems.

The ‘*Surviving Medicine Seminar*’ aims to raise awareness regarding issues medical students face, as well as discussing potential improvements to the current situation confronting medical students. The seminar gives students the opportunity to hear high profile speakers in the field of mental health, including Professor Patrick McGorry. Another seminar offered by MUMUS is the *Q&A Forum*, which allows younger students to ask a panel of senior medical students questions regarding coping with medical studies, and what the years ahead of them may entail. Finally, there is the *R U OK Day Morning Tea*, which seeks to promote a sense of community to clinical students, especially given that they spend little to no time on university campus and therefore may feel more isolated. Morning tea is provided by the medical students’ society for each of the major clinical sites, which this year has expanded to three major clinical sites.

MUMUS currently has a dedicated Community and Wellbeing Officer.

(10) **University of New England**

The University of New England have both faculty-organised mental health events and events run by the University of New England Medical Students’ Association (UNEMSA).

Mental health events organised by UNEMSA include fortnightly *Body Balance* sessions free of charge for members, and various sporting days such as *Tennis Day*, which are designed to encourage students to exercise and mingle with each other. A *Mental Health Month is*
currently in the process of being organised. This initiative will offer students opportunities to participate in events such as the *Mental Health Speaker Night*, where speakers from Beyond Blue, UNE Counseling Service as well as medical specialists such as psychiatrists provide students with a greater understanding of the prevalence of mental health issues in medical students and doctors. Another component of Mental Health Month is a Quidditch Competition designed to encourage students to engage in physical activity and socialise with their peers. A ‘*Bring Healthy Food to PBL*’ competition held during this month will promote healthy eating, with the PBL with the healthiest and yummiest food winning their PBL food supplied for the week.

From 2013, The Faculty of Medicine will also give first and second year students the opportunity to complete a *Mental Health First Aid Course*.

UNEMSA currently includes a portfolio covering Sports and Wellbeing.

(11) **University of Newcastle**

There are several current initiatives offered by the University of Newcastle Medical Society (UNMS) that specifically deal with student mental health. *The First Year Mentoring Program* pairs each Year 1 student with an older student who ‘shows them the ropes’ and helps them settle in to university and medical school life. *Orientation Camp* for Year 1 students includes mentoring sessions, team-building exercises and social events that promote connectedness within the year level. *The Medicine Peer Assisted Learning Sessions (MedPALS)* program aims to relieve academic stress and exam anxiety during the examination period. Finally, there is the faculty-run *Mental Health First Aid* program, which is available to all students. In the past, UNMS has offered the *First Year Amazing Race*, which encouraged bonding between first years.

There is no dedicated Wellbeing Officer at the University of Newcastle.

(12) **University of Notre Dame (Freemantle)**

The student mental health initiative ‘*Live Well, Study Well*’ seminars offered by the Medical Students Association of Notre Dame (MSAND) to all students at the university addresses topics such as memory, exam preparation, study skills, stress, nutrition and sleep. *Med100 Survival Night* is an evening event where older students share their knowledge and experiences regarding course structure, strategies for thriving and study techniques, learning resources, nearby services (GP clinics, counselling services), and information for students from interstate. This initiative also includes a small-group component, where first years are able to direct questions to senior students.

The *Med100 Survival Guide* is a publication that is emailed to all first years at the commencement of their course, and includes information especially for interstate students including accommodation, travel details, and shipping possessions. The student-run
Mentoring Program assigns an older student to a small group of 3-5 students, who can use these sessions as they wish. The focus may range from teaching clinical skills to providing support and guidance. Finally, a GP Night is run specifically for Year 2 students during their psychiatry block with the aim being to allow interstate students to find a GP. This event followed research conducted by the medical student society, which showed that approximately half of each cohort has come from interstate, and many of them do not have a local GP.

A dedicated Wellbeing Officer plays a large role in the organisation of these initiatives.

(13) University of Notre Dame (Sydney)

The Medical Association of Notre Dame University Sydney (MANDUS) has introduced various programs that deal with student mental health. The Family Picnic is an opportunity for students with children to form a sense of community, and includes lunch, with games for the children. Another initiative is the Culture Club, which aims to promote cultural events in Sydney, as well as social interaction between students outside of the classroom. The club offers events such as dance classes, festivals, music, theatre, and trips to art galleries. Finally, Mental Health Month occurs in November, and intends to raise awareness of mental health issues among the medical student body.

In 2012, MANDUS introduced a Health and Wellbeing Portfolio managed by a dedicated Wellbeing Officer.

(14) University of Sydney

An initiative introduced in 2013 by the Sydney University Medical Society (SUMS) is the First Year Buddy Program, which matches first year students with a second year, based on common interests and background. This program allows first year students to raise pressing issues with their buddy, and helps them feel comfortable with commencing medical school. In the past, SUMS has offered meditation and relaxation workshops, however these are no longer available.

A dedicated Wellbeing Officer currently oversees student mental health initiatives.

(15) University of New South Wales

The University of New South Wales Medical Society (UNSW Medical Student Society) has implemented two main programs dedicated to student mental health issues. The first is Mental Health Awareness Week, an initiative intended to reduce stigma associated with mental illness. This event is run in conjunction with the Disability Awareness Campaign. The second program is the ‘Smash the Stigma’ campaign, which is run by the UNSW medical students’ society in collaboration with the National Union of Students. One of the ways the campaign raises awareness about mental health conditions and the stigma associated with such conditions is through the distribution of stickers and posters.
UNSW do not have a dedicated Wellbeing Officer, however a Students with Disabilities Portfolio exists. However, the UNSW Medical Student Society is the only association to report having a dedicated Students with Disabilities Officer. This position also focuses on students with mental health issues. The goal of this position is to make university a positive experience, and to reduce disadvantage and discrimination within the University.

(16) University of Queensland

The University of Queensland Medical Society (UQMS) does not have any current or past initiatives specifically aimed at dealing with student mental health issues, or a dedicated Wellbeing Officer.

(17) University of Tasmania

‘Health and Wellbeing Week’ is one program currently run by the Tasmanian University Medical Students’ Society (TUMSS) each semester. This event promotes self-care, with each day highlighting a specific theme such as exercise, diet and mental health. Breakfast and lunch are provided, as are activities such as fitness classes and other group activities like ice-skating, laser-tag or bowling. The other initiative organized by TUMSS is the ‘First Year-Third Year Mentorship Program’, which aims to provide a safe environment to discuss the stresses of starting university and medicine, moving away from home and anxiety.

There is currently a Student Welfare Officer position on TUMSS.

(18) University of Western Australia

The Western Australian Medical Students’ Society (WAMSS) is the only medical students’ society that has a student-run group, complete with an official subcommittee, specifically dedicated to mental health issues. WAMSS offers a number of programs dealing with student mental health. In 2012, the Students Passionate About Mental Health (SPAMH) group was created for students who are dedicated to raising awareness about the link between mental health, wellbeing and general health. The goal of SPAMH is to reduce stigma towards mental health and psychiatry, and to equip medical students with the knowledge and skills to be effective advocates for patients and professionals with mental health issues. SPAMH also hold a Q&A Session where a panel of professionals in diverse fields including politics and psychiatry answer questions from the general public. However, the target audience of this event is students and doctors. The SPAMH Coffee Club provides students with an opportunity to discuss mental health issues with guest speakers. R U OK? Day is another event organized by SPAMH to raise awareness about mental illness. Finally there is the Little Book of Calm, which is a publication that covers topics such as study and exam techniques, and is aimed at reducing exam-related anxiety levels.

In place of a Wellbeing Officer, WAMSS includes SPAMH among its official subcommittees.
University of Western Sydney

*Blue Week* is a major event that was introduced by the University of Western Sydney Medical Society (UWSMS) in 2013. The purpose of Blue Week is to raise awareness about mental health and reduce stigma associated with mental health problems, as well as improve student wellbeing. Discussion and promotion of three key AMSA policies (the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy, the Health and Wellbeing Policy, and the Marriage Equality and Health Policy) played a key role in Blue Week.

Other projects being developed by UWSMS include the *GPSN and MDA Wellbeing Events*, where both companies sponsor and present a lecture to students regarding health and wellbeing during life as a medical student and future health practitioner. A main topic to be discussed is “effective study, exam stress and medicine”. UWSMS are also developing a psychological assistance page for their website with resources and links to help their students cope with the stresses of being a medical student.

Finally, the university’s rural health group offers a free *Mental Health First Aid* course to all students studying health sciences at UWS. It is a full day course that aims to teach students how to recognize early signs and provide mental health first aid to people suffering from depression, suicidal thoughts, psychosis, panic attacks, self-injury, trauma, eating disorders and drug/alcohol abuse.

UWSMS currently includes two Sports and Wellbeing Officers on their Council.

University of Wollongong

Currently, the Wollongong University Medical Students’ Society (WUMSS) offers the *Women in Medicine, Men in Medicine* events, which are social evenings where doctors speak about managing medicine and their personal lives. In addition, the *Shoalhaven People’s Activities, Recreation and Training Association (SPARTA)* organizes sporting and wellbeing activities for students at Shoalhaven campus. Past initiatives implemented were *bikram yoga* sessions which were facilitated by the Tanna Island Project, a not-for-profit organisation. A *Mental Health First Aid* course has been offered by WUMSS in the past, but is no longer available.

There is currently no dedicated Wellbeing Officer in WUMSS, but a Wellbeing portfolio is to be introduced in 2014.