

# Medicine – a healthy profession?

by Dr Roger Sexton

There are many healthy and resilient doctors who enjoy their work and practise good self-care. However, a literature search reveals that whilst the physical health of doctors is at least equal to that of the general population, mental health problems such as burnout are significant within the profession and the complications of depression are more serious.

It is not uncommon for the symptoms of poor health in an overworked doctor to be the basis for a complaint. Such doctors have often struggled to cope alone and may have tried self-treatment to no avail. The pathway towards regulatory intervention is even more stressful.

The data is concerning and must drive us to find practical solutions to seek out and assist members of the medical profession as early as possible in their illness.

However, doctors value their privacy and are wary of revealing ill-health and impairment to colleagues. We also display a wide range of attitudes towards self-treatment, self-diagnosis, treatment of family and other doctors.

Having a skilled GP who offers independent treatment, advice and advocacy in the health system is a real asset. The South Australian doctors' health survey in 2008 found that at least 40 per cent of doctors do not have their own GP.

The results of the survey provided other important key findings including:

- doctors avoid presenting with mental health problems
- Doctors self-prescribe for acute and chronic illnesses (eg, BP, NIDDM)
- 12% had self-treated for depression during the previous 12 months
- 23% rated their health as poor (higher in younger doctors)
- 25% of all doctors had not had a check-up in the last five years
- 69% regarded check-ups as important for personal health
- 71% of doctors listed at least one barrier (such as embarrassment) to seeing another doctor
- only around 50% of doctors had income protection insurance

Doctors are regarded by patients, employers, the Government and our own colleagues as self-reliant, well-resourced, educated, and trained to identify and treat illness – and also that we have preferential access to the best our health system has to offer.

The reality is different and it is time that a corporate, proactive and outreach approach to the health of the profession was promoted, via a profession-wide program which has permission to

- invite doctors in for a voluntary periodical medical check-up
- update immunisations
- risk-assess
- offer career counselling

can be offered to keep doctors up to date with all recommended screening tests and immunisations. There is primary research evidence that this approach has majority profession-wide support.