

## University Hospital Geelong - Peer Support Program

The University Hospital Geelong Peer Support Program started in 2017 because of a particularly challenging event and a recognition that doctors and nurses in the ED often find benefit in talking to other ED doctors and nurses about stressful workplace incidents. The literature showed that staff Peer Support programs run in areas like the military and fire departments but that no such programs existed in hospital settings. It began with a team of ED Doctors and later that year expanded to a Nursing ED Peer Support team. In recent months we conducted Peer Support Training workshops and now have the advent of an Administrative Staff ED Peer Support Team in recognition that all of us working in ED are exposed to potentially traumatic events on a regular basis and can benefit from contact by a peer post event – someone who understands our role and workplace context. The process involves notification to the team of a critical incident/potentially traumatic event followed by contact in the form of a generic text to involved staff members. There is an opt out option for contact which usually takes place in the form of a phone call within 48 hours post event. This phone call provides space to speak, empathy and validation/normalisation of responses as well as acknowledging existing strategies, strengths and supports. The person being called can talk about whatever is relevant for them post event in a confidential and non-judgemental setting. A generic text is then sent post call with optional resources listed. The service is limited to two chats per incident in recognition that Peer Support differs from counselling and other modalities of support and is designed for short term intervention with the goal of lessening the impact of potentially traumatic events.

Anecdotally, the presence of the program has been received very positively backed up by findings from surveys.

The 2023 survey sent to 96 ED doctors had 30 responders.

In answer to the question 'Do you think it's useful to have a peer support program that contacts doctors post critical incident?' 100% answered Yes including 6 doctors who had not been contacted by peer support.

Some of the comments from surveys in relation to the program were:

- 'invaluable opportunity to chat about difficult cases after the fact'
- 'I was amazed at how useful I found the discussion, in terms of the emotional support and offloading , plus thinking through clinical aspects'
- 'important for wellbeing of staff to feel supported after critical incidents'
- 'the sense that there is a team at work in the ED and that others care and have ones back is always a positive and useful thing'
- 'wish there had been this program during my training'
- 'simply knowing that someone would make contact had a great impact on me. Just that knowledge seemed to relieve the stress of what I had witnessed. It meant I didn't feel like I had to deal with it alone if I found myself struggling post the event'

The program has evolved because of feedback both informal and via surveys x3 since its beginnings in 2017 and we are excited that other areas of the hospital (and potentially other health services) have now implemented formalised Peer Support Programs along the same lines in order to provide another option for support for staff exposed to potentially traumatic events.