



**VICTORIAN
ALLIED HEALTH
PROFESSIONALS
ASSOCIATION**



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Victorian Allied Health Professionals Association (VAHPA)

**Swinburne & RMIT study exposes Healthcare
Worker distress in Victorian public health system**

As the Victorian health system faces uncertainty ahead of the next COVID-19 wave that has begun, a joint Swinburne University and RMIT University research team, in conjunction with the Victorian Allied Health Professionals Association (VAHPA), have released their findings from the *Survey on Workplace Climate and Well-being of Victorian Allied Health Professionals*. Surveyed over 4 weeks in August-September 2022 coming off the peak of the Omicron B5 wave, this report paints a picture of the stress that Allied Health Professionals are under and compares the finding to a survey held during the Delta wave in August-September 2021.

The survey report from over 900 Allied Health Professionals across public and private hospitals, community health, aged care, disability and private practices, paints a devastating picture of burnout, under-resourcing and a workforce verging on collapse. We are facing a critical workforce shortage in the future if we do not address the serious issues identified in the report.

Using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), researchers found that the mental health of Allied Health Professionals had deteriorated over the course of 2022 but more alarmingly, one-quarter (25%) of Allied Health Professionals may be experiencing moderate to severe levels of distress consistent with severe depression and/or anxiety disorder.

Allied Health Professionals include Radiographers, Physiotherapists, Occupational Therapists, Sonographers, Social Workers, Speech Pathologist, Podiatrists and Radiation Therapists and represent the critical health workforce that is the engine-room of the health system, yet they are suffering serious moral injury because of workload pressures exacerbated by COVID-19.

After nearly 3 years of the pandemic and with Public Health mitigations wound back completely, Victoria's hospitals are under increasing and unrelenting pressure. Allied Health Professionals are suffering psychological distress and moral injury that has serious implications for the individuals but also for maintaining health services.

The survey looks at psychological safety in the workplace, bullying and job satisfaction. Survey data and commentary from survey respondents indicates dangerous levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout with unsustainable workloads. There are serious safety implications for the workers and their patients. We cannot allow the psychological damage that is being inflicted on Allied Health Professionals to continue any longer.

The report states:

In the context of burnout, the study found a majority of respondents found work exhausting, with a significant proportion (89%), indicating they were emotionally exhausted. Of this, over half (58%) often felt burnout (i.e., often or always) due to their work. These are concerning findings regarding the general long-term health and wellbeing of the workforce.

Quotes attributable to Allied Health Professional respondents:

“Staff mental health at (XXXX) Health is horrifyingly bad and management have done nothing to help. I am concerned that someone will take their life from the pressure that is being put on them. The doctors bully staff. Majority of us want out!”

“Allied health is put last and consistently underfunded and undervalued. It’s making me think of leaving a profession I love. There is no respect from senior management.....The problem gets worse and worse and I worry how we will attract and retain good staff in the public sector with the ongoing culture of undervaluing, overworking with no sign of reprieve...”

“I feel people who have worked in health for a long time thought it would be a hump (pandemic) we would get over. We are not getting over the hump. It’s not going back to normal. We are all burnt out and over it. Reduced staff. More pressure to get patients out. There is...no management contact...I am leaving. It’s sad as I never thought I would leave.”

“We are all exhausted and at breaking point.”

“There is just too much for us all to do.”

Quotes attributable to VAHPA Executive Officer, Andrew Hewat:

“This report highlights the perilous situation that allied health is currently facing. The responses indicate a workforce who are burnt out and suffering moral injury as a consequence of simply doing their job.”

“Enough is enough, we can’t continue to keep heaping the burden of a floundering health system onto healthcare workers. Allied health professionals have played a critical role in the Covid response but are not seeing the support or resources to keep going.”

“These are highly educated, highly experienced professionals that can’t simply be replaced. We are asking far too much of them and we must urgently address the workload pressures exacerbated by the unmitigated spread of COVID-19.”

“Allied health professionals care for their patients and are constantly being squeezed to achieve more with less. They are being forced to choose between patient safety and meeting demands. If forced to compromise on patient safety, many will simply walk away from the profession.”

“We are seeing unrealistic, unsustainable workloads that are forcing people to leave and the cascading effect is more allied health professionals burn out or get sick, further compounding the problem. It takes 4-6 years for an allied health professional to qualify but very little time to crush them through overwork and a lack of respect.”

“Allied health professionals are the essential but forgotten health workforce. From imaging, diagnostics, treating cancer, providing rehabilitation, counselling, home care, helping people breathe, talk, swallow, walk and just function again, saving limbs, educating, finding housing, and caring for and treating our community. Our health system revolves around allied health professionals, yet most people know very little about us until they need our care. Without us, the whole system collapses.”

Quote to be attributable to Swinburne researcher Professor Peter Holland:

“The report reveals some concerning findings regarding the general long-term health and wellbeing of the workforce.”

“This is a highly skilled and educated workforce. While short-term job attrition may low, it is important to note that many professionals are considering leaving the profession in the long term. This loss of knowledge and human capital will be difficult to replace.”

For further comment:

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