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Manatū Hauora – Ministry of Health

mhaengagement@health.govt.nz

Draft Suicide Prevention Action Plan for 2025-2029

Tēnā koē

Te Whare Piki Ora o Māhutonga – the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) is the leading advocate for surgical standards, professionalism, and surgical education in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia.

Our submission focuses the need to support the mental health and wellbeing of the surgical workforce, including protection from the risk of suicide, within the stressful workplace that has developed within the healthcare system in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The mental health and wellbeing of doctors is a critical enabler of and risk to the sustainable delivery of healthcare in Aotearoa New Zealand. Doctors are a critical specialist workforce which takes many years to train after graduation and cannot be readily recruited or replaced. They are currently at increasing mental health risk, with unprecedented levels of burnout and moral injury. International studies report surgeons as having the highest rate of suicides amongst medical specialistsⁱ.

Dangerous levels of stress placed on hospital doctors, including surgeons, are caused by factors within the control of Government and its health agencies:

- long work hours and poorly controlled shift patterns, including vacancies, that impact particularly on acute surgery required day and night
- under-resourcing and unsafe workloads, yet planned surgical waiting lists continue to grow
- uncertainty, hiring freezes, cost-cutting, restructuring, and indications of further substantial cuts in the public sector healthcare workforce - professions can manage change, but ongoing uncertainty is debilitating
- drawn out processes under the Health and Disability Commissioner Act 1994.

The Wellbeing Charter for Doctorsⁱⁱ developed by 18 Australasian medical colleges in 2021 includes principles that guide the wellbeing of doctors:

- Maintaining wellbeing leads to the performance of high quality and effective health care delivery and optimises patient care.
- Doctors who maintain and maximise their health and wellbeing are able to manage the physical and emotional demands of medicine.
- Wellbeing is essential to achieving the competencies required for good medical practice.
- Wellbeing is beneficial to the individual and the medical community in which doctors work.
- Jurisdictions, hospitals and medical colleges must support the wellbeing of doctors and provide an environment that is safe, accessible and inclusive for all.

RACS takes seriously its role under the Charter by:

- leadership in implementing the RACS Wellbeing Action Plan 2022-2026
- standards for our training curriculum and CPD program have a strong focus on mental health and wellbeing of surgeons



- fostering research to understand the needs and wellbeing status of its Fellows, Trainees, and Specialist IMGs
- advocating to reduce professional risk factors for the health and wellbeing of doctors
- promoting the practice of critical incident debriefing
- providing support programmes, including a confidential psychological support service.

The Wellbeing Charter for Doctors also sets out responsibilities for Government including:

- having doctors' wellbeing at the core of healthcare strategy and leadership accountability, enabling compassionate leaders, measuring staff wellbeing regularly and confidentially, identifying and acting on risks including organisational factors, team factors and job design
- providing a safe and healthy working environment including cover for sick leave, reasonable working hours and flexible work options.

We ask that Manatū Hauora use its policy role and its oversight of Te Whatu Ora - Health New Zealand to better recognise the high level of work-related stress for doctors within the healthcare system as an increasing suicide risk and to implement urgent action as above to better safeguard the mental health of doctors. These recommendations may also apply to the wider clinical workforce which is under similar work-related stress.

Protecting and sustaining the mental health and wellbeing of doctors requires a collaborative approach and willingness to respond by doctors, medical colleges, healthcare leaders and government. We are committed to playing our part in this response.

RACS represents more than 7000 surgeons and 1300 surgical Trainees and International Medical Graduates (IMGs) in nine surgical specialties across Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. RACS is the accredited training provider in nine surgical specialties. Surgeons in these specialties are also required by RACS and Te Kaunihera Rata o Aotearoa Medical Council of Aotearoa (MCNZ), to continue with surgical education and review of their practice throughout their surgical careers.

Nāku noa, nā

Ros Pochin
Chair, Aotearoa New Zealand National Committee

ⁱ [Depression and Suicide Among American Surgeons—A Grave Threat to the Surgeon Workforce | Surgery | JAMA Surgery | JAMA Network](#)

[Special Report: Suicidal Ideation Among American Surgeons | Depressive Disorders | JAMA Surgery | JAMA Network](#)

[Assessment of Risk Factors for Suicide Among US Health Care Professionals | Suicide | JAMA Surgery | JAMA Network](#)

ⁱⁱ [2021-07-19-PUB-Wellbeing-Charter-for-Doctors---Final.pdf](#)