

Focus

What we need to know about the DHAS

John Richards is a member of the editorial board of the NZFP

What is the DHAS?

These letters stand for Doctors' Health Advisory Service. This is a service set up to assist doctors who have health or other problems which have the potential to interfere with their ability to function properly in their care of patients or in their day to day life. Latterly it has been made available to medical students, nurses, dentists and physiotherapists. However, this account will confine itself largely to doctors.

Who constitutes the DHAS?

The service is provided for doctors and their families by fellow medical practitioners who have had some education and experience in the special field of colleague care and who volunteer to provide assistance to those who are encountering problems.

Sometimes the help is provided by the DHAS members themselves while at other times they see their role as ensuring that the ailing doctor gets the best possible care from someone known to have more specialised knowledge of that particular person's problem.

DHAS members will not reveal or discuss an individual's problems to or with other doctors without first seeking the permission of the doctor seeking help.

In cases of denial it is not uncommon for two DHAS members to work together to confront the doctor concerned.

How do I contact the DHAS?

It is best to use the national helpline 04 471 2654. During the day, this is usually answered by somebody who will take basic details and notify national DHAS co-ordinator Edwin Whiteside.

Out-of-hours there is an answering machine to enable messages to be left. Dr Whiteside will then contact a DHAS doctor in your area, who will be in touch with you as soon as possible.

Who should contact the DHAS?

Anyone in the professional groups listed above who feels that help is needed. Also spouses, partners, colleagues, patients or friends who are concerned for the welfare of people in these categories.

Many doctors, when they recognise a problem, visit their own GP and get satisfactory help. Such people do not usually require the help of the DHAS. Some, however, are at a loss to know where to turn for help, or are too embarrassed to seek the help of colleagues who are often well known to them.

More often the patients or family of a practitioner recognise that there is a problem, but do not know what to do about it.

Among the most difficult situations is that of the doctor who has become alcohol or drug dependent. Another would be the doctor whose memory is failing and who is starting to make mistakes in prescribing.

The service does not force itself upon anyone, and a doctor who has been referred can refuse to accept the services of the DHAS when they are offered.

What about confidentiality?

The DHAS is a confidential service. The DHAS is not a wing of the New Zealand Medical Council and operates as an independent entity.

However, if it is evident that the doctor is practising in a manner which is endangering the life or health of patients, there is a legal requirement to notify the Medical Council.

This is an obligation on all doctors and not merely the DHAS.

Where this notification seems inevitable, it is common practice for the DHAS doctor to consult with the local Medical Officer of Health in the first instance, and the Medical Officer of Health usually assumes the responsibility for the notification. This preserves the distance the DHAS likes to keep from the perceived punitive functions of the Council.

In all other circumstances, information is not relayed to any other body.

Should the DHAS receive a referral about a doctor, the source of the referral is kept confidential and the doctor concerned is not informed of who was responsible for it unless the referrer gives permission for his or her identity to be revealed.

It has been apparent over the years that some doctors approach the DHAS only at the last minute in a desperate attempt to fend off the Medical Council. This is in the hope that the Council will view them more favourably if they are seen to be getting help from the DHAS. It is

much better to contact the DHAS before things reach this stage, but the DHAS will always try to help even in these circumstances.

Cost

The DHAS receives funding from a variety of sources, including the Medical Assurance Society and the Medical Protection Society, and the service is free to practitioners.

In the event that prolonged supervision is necessary, ultimately some charge may be made.

Prevention

In order to assist in preventing problems the DHAS has produced a handbook, *In Sickness and in Health* which can be purchased for \$18. Write to DHAS, PO Box 812 Wellington to get your copy.

This book discusses many of the stresses that affect medical practitioners at various stages of their careers and offers advice on how these may be avoided or ameliorated.