

AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY MENTAL HEALTH FRAMEWORK

CASE STUDY UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

CATALYSING CHANGE AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The University of Tasmania's School of Medicine takes a continuous improvement approach to delivering suicide prevention initiatives, informed by students' experiences and perceptions. This allows the university to update and change its practices to better support students' mental health and wellbeing.

When the University of Tasmania (UTAS) School of Medicine had two medical students die by suicide within a six-month period in 2017/2018, students and staff knew something had to change.

"Suicide is always a very emotive issue. These events rocked our tight-knit community and naturally we started asking 'what can we do?'," says Colin Clark, Senior Psychologist, Student Accessibility and Wellbeing, UTAS.



Medical students are exposed to many stressors that put them at greater risk of mental ill-health - from having little time to cultivate self-care practices, to feeling immense pressure to achieve top marks.

Recognising the need for urgent change, the UTAS School of Medicine worked with the Tasmanian University Medical Students' Society (TUMSS) to better understand student needs and the challenges they experience. Systemic changes were then instigated to assist students to better manage their mental health and wellbeing.

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**COLIN CLARK, SENIOR PSYCHOLOGIST,
STUDENT ACCESSIBILITY AND WELLBEING**



CHANGING THE COURSE

After students expressed how their heavy workload was impacting their mental wellbeing, the university introduced key changes to the timetable, curriculum and course delivery methods.

Importantly, the timetable has been modified to incorporate regular scheduled free periods, giving students time for other priorities. Before this, students had little spare time to attend appointments throughout the week, explains Rosie Smail, a third year medical student and TUMSS Student Welfare Officer.

“Our timetable changes every week. That’s really stressful if you have a job, are looking after family or want to make a doctor’s appointment. Some students really wanted to see a counsellor, but they just couldn’t because it didn’t work with the timetable,” says Rosie.

The university has also introduced greater flexibility in course completion time. President of the TUMSS 2020 Executive Committee, fourth year medical student Brittany Kay notes that the School of Medicine is now more willing to approve requests for taking leave from study.

“Recently we have had multiple students experience burn-out midway through their degree. These students were allowed to take the year off and continue with their degree the following year. This has been largely successful, with these students integrating into their new year group, and catching up academically,” explains Brittany.

Despite restructuring curriculums being difficult for facilitators, who may be pressured to deliver education outcomes within tight timeframes, Colin believes most staff recognise that the changes help students maintain balance in their busy lives.

“Whenever you try to change a heavy curriculum like medicine there’s always going to be some level of opposition. These students are expected to cope, and it doesn’t always work that way. But the culture is changing as people become more aware,” says Colin.

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STUDENT ACCESSIBILITY AND WELLBEING**



PUTTING WELLBEING ON THE CURRICULUM

Improving mental health literacy was another key area of focus for the students, who wanted to increase their capacity to respond to others in need.

“The students decided they needed to become more literate in mental health and wellbeing. They advocated strongly for their course to look at the concept of mental wellbeing, rather than just mental ill health,” explains Colin.

As a result, Mental Health First Aid is now a compulsory unit of study in the first year medicine curriculum at UTAS.

Lectures about mental health, suicide and mindfulness delivered by doctors, psychologists and other allied health professionals have also been introduced into the curriculum.

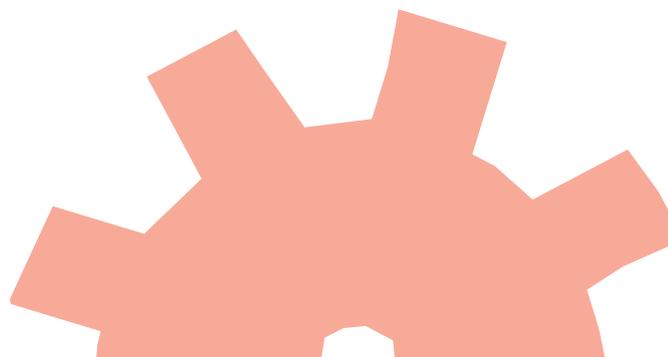
IMPROVING SERVICE ACCESS

In response to many students saying their schedules made it difficult to see a counsellor during the day, the university has made modifications to the way counselling services are delivered.

Counselling services are now offered in central Hobart, making access easier for time-poor students who are unable to travel to the Sandy Bay campus to see a counsellor during opening hours.

Service hours have also been staggered to help students access appointments outside of standard operating hours.

Colin notes that people living in regional centres often have limited access to psychological services, so the university counselling service is particularly important, as is the university’s after-hours crisis line operated by Lifeline on weekends and nights.



CREATING COMMUNITY

With an aim to improve and support the academic and social wellbeing of medical students in Tasmania, TUMSS runs events that help to foster a sense of community and camaraderie among students.

During COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, the TUMSS Student Welfare Officers offered various online initiatives to ensure students stayed socially connected. The TUMSS Wellbeing Working Group organised online quiz nights, games nights, book clubs and exercise classes.

Brittany notes that conversations about mental health and wellbeing are woven into many TUMSS events. For example, the issue of mental health in the medical fraternity is raised during Careers Nights, with doctors encouraged to discuss their own personal struggles and offer honest advice on managing mental wellbeing while juggling a demanding course and profession.

Brittany believes that stigma surrounding suicide and mental health conditions is less prevalent among her peers than it once was.

“There’s really not a lot of stigma at all among our current cohort,” says Brittany.

“Mental health is now a very open topic of conversation among students and lecturers.”

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BRITTANY KAY, PRESIDENT, TASMANIAN UNIVERSITY MEDICAL STUDENTS’ SOCIETY 2020

FIND OUT MORE

Contact Counselling.Services@utas.edu.au

[Tasmanian University Medical Students’ Society.](#)

[University Mental Health Framework.](#)

LINKS TO THE FRAMEWORK

The University of Tasmania’s continuous improvement approach to delivering suicide prevention initiatives within the School of Medicine is an example of effectively using information from students’ experiences and needs as data to build an understanding of what works for their mental health and wellbeing.



This aligns with **principle six** of the [University Mental Health Framework](#).

Programs and initiatives to support students’ mental health and wellbeing typically involve a range of different practices. This case study also draws on other practices described in the framework by:

- coordinating policies, processes and supports in order to reduce undesirable effects on mental health and wellbeing and support student success;
- recognising good mental health and wellbeing is an important part of teaching and learning, with student-centred, course-specific support integrated into teaching and learning activities; and
- students taking up active peer support roles, such as through TUMSS, which allow them to share experiences, facilitate access to supports and increase connections within UTAS.

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