

VDHP Newsletter

WELCOME to the NEWSLETTER— from the VICTORIAN DOCTORS HEALTH PROGRAM

We hope that you will find this an informative forum for all aspects of doctors health and wellbeing

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Significant dates of Interest

- 19 Sep 00—VDHP incorporated and Board appointed
- 17 Oct 00—First VDHP Board meeting
- 2 Feb 01—Appointment of Dr Warhaft as Medical Director
- 30 Apr 01—Opening of premises
- 19 May 01—First VDHP client
- 30 Aug 01—Official opening by the Hon. John Thwaites Minister for Health.

A brief history:

During the early 1990's there was an increasing awareness of shortcomings in the provision of health services to the medical profession, and in particular the provision of assistance for those doctors and medical students who had health problems that were causing, or likely to cause, impairment. This concern was widespread throughout the profession, and accordingly AMA Victoria and the Medical Practitioners Board of Victoria (MPBV) agreed to investigate possible solutions to the problem. They were aware of the formation of 'Physician Health Programs' throughout the US and Canada, and in 1999 the MPBV invited Dr Gerry Summer, Director of the Alabama PHP to come to Australia.

It was agreed by the AMA Victoria and the MPBV to establish a program modeled on the North American experience. The **VDHP** was established as a fully independent entity separate from the MPBV and AMA Victoria.

Funding is through the MPBV, as this was the best way to distribute the cost evenly across the profession. *No member of the VDHP Board can be a current member of the MPBV.*

The VDHP received its first participant on 19 May 2001. Since then, it has found a surprisingly high demand for its services across a wide range of clinical problems. At the end of its first year of operation it had assisted 129 doctors and students, and participated in a range of other non-clinical activities.

The VDHP is believed to be the first Doctors Health program of its kind outside of North America. As such, it is regarded as breaking new ground in this important specialty.

Doctors' Health Advisory Service

The Doctors Health Advisory Service has provided assistance to sick doctors in Victoria over a very long period. The members of this voluntary service have given freely of their time and expertise. The **VDHP** acknowledges the important role that they have undertaken. It will seek to continue to cooperate with Drs John Mathew and Duncan Mansie, who have acquired enormous experience in the field of doctors health.

Scanning photo from the official opening of the VDHP

Photo is of Hon John Thwaites, Drs Flynn, Haikerwal, Jones & Warhaft

Our First Year

In our first year of operation, the **VDHP** has assisted over 120 doctors and medical students. Common problems have included:

- alcohol abuse,
- drug use disorders—narcotics, benzodiazepines and other mood altering drugs,
- stress/emotional problems, including professional burn-out,
- disruptive doctors,
- other psychiatric problems, - depressive, bipolar, psychotic and other disorders
- physical illnesses

We are currently monitoring 27 participants in our Case-management, Aftercare and Monitoring Program ("CAMP" participants).

The non-clinical activities include over 20 presentations to hospitals, colleges and other medical organisations.

VDHP NEWS

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VDHP Board

Dr Taffy Jones (Chair)
MBBS, FRACMA

Dr Sandra Hacker
MBBS, FRANZCP, FAICD,
DPM

Dr Channa Wijesinghe
MBBS, FRANZCP

Dr Paul Woodhouse
MBBS, MBA

Prof Doris Young
MBBS, MD, FRACGP

Medical Director

Dr Naham (Jack) Warhaft
MBBS, FRANZCA

Administration Manager

Ms Debbie Dunstall

Alcohol & other Drug Consultant

Mr Gordon Storey
BBS, Grad Dip Soc. Sc.

Counselling Services Consultant

Ms Barbara Kustra
BA, Grad Dip &
MA counselling

Thank You

The **VDHP** congratulates the AMA Victoria and the Medical Practitioners Board of Victoria for their central role in the development of the VDHP. It particularly wishes to acknowledge the work of the then President of the MPBV Dr Kerry Breen in promoting the program as a high priority. Dr Channa Wijesinghe (then MPBV Health Committee Chair) was an enthusiastic contributor to the early discussions, with support from Dr Kay Leeton who was a Health Committee member. Channa, who is no longer a member of the MPBV, continues his involvement as a **VDHP** board member.

CASE # 001

On Saturday 19 May the **VDHP** conducted its first clinical intervention. Walter (not his real name) is a senior specialist with teaching hospital commitments. He was referred to us by his practice manager after receiving several reports of him coming to work with signs of alcohol consumption.

At preliminary assessment it was clear that Walter had a serious problem with alcohol dependency. His family life was in disarray; his three adult children were very worried about him and he was isolating socially. These observations are consistent with the usual finding that by the time alcoholism impacts on work we are dealing with an advanced form of the condition.

Our American Connections

The **VDHP** has, to a large extent, been modeled on 'Physician Health Programs' (PHP's) that have been established in all US states and most Canadian provinces. Many of these have been operating for 15 years or more, and the combined experience in managing doctors health, and particularly impaired doctors, runs into many thousands of cases.

In June 2001 Dr Mike Kaufmann, Medical Director of the Ontario PHP, visited our program for one week, and gave us invaluable advice. He made presentations to AMA Victoria, the MPBV, and to members of the Addiction Medicine community. In August 2001 Jack Warhaft was a guest of the Alabama PHP and the Washington PHP, spending a week at each. In April 2002 he attended the annual meeting of the (US) Federation of Physicians Health Programs, and then visited the Ontario PHP, the program that

In 1998 a *Doctors Health Program Steering Committee* was formed. This worked separately from the AMA Victoria and the MPBV, but provided input into early planning of the proposed program. This committee included Prof Greg Whelan, Drs John Paull, Tom Lambert, Frank Buchanan, Sandra Hacker, Channa Wijesinghe, Paul Woodhouse, Jack Warhaft and Mr Gordon Storey, our drug and alcohol consultant. Sandra Hacker and Paul Woodhouse were also subsequently appointed to the VDHP Board. The **VDHP** is most grateful for the time and the important contribution made by the members of that committee.

Walter was referred for inpatient treatment at a specialist alcohol and drug facility. Following discharge, he agreed to participate in the **VDHP CAMP** (case management, aftercare and monitoring) program, and the **VDHP** helped facilitate his re-entry to work.

Walter has complied with all of his treatment and monitoring requirements, and is an enthusiastic participant in our recovery program. His family life has been restored to normal; his children are delighted. His work has been beyond reproach. He has recently celebrated one year of recovery, and looks forward to a happy and successful future.

we consider most closely resembles our own. He has used these opportunities to develop the case management and monitoring programs for doctors recovering from substance use. Other issues discussed include the case management of doctors with psychiatric problems, advocacy for doctors returning to work, the establishment of hospital 'Wellness Committees', and the development of relationships with key organisations both within and outside the medical profession. Jack is a member of the PHP directors internet group, and is able to get assistance on a range of clinical and other problems in between his visits to the US.

The *VDHP* is most grateful for the generous assistance afforded by these and many other US Physician Health Programs. We look forward to continuing to work with

Staff Profile

Jack Warhaft Medical Director, VDHP

Jack has come to our program from a background in anaesthesia, having obtained his Fellowship in 1968. He developed an interest in doctors health through working with anaesthetists who had become impaired as a result of chemical dependency. He furthered his knowledge by working with US and Canadian Physician Health Programs. He has been a long-time advocate of the therapeutic approach to problems that in the past have been subject to punitive or disciplinary approaches.

Jack was an anaesthetist at Box Hill Hospital for nearly 30 years, and was a member of the committee that conducted the highly successful re-entry program for anaesthetists who had experienced drug dependency. He has held a long standing interest in exploring self-help therapeutic approaches to addiction related problems.

Jack spends 4 days a week at the VDHP, and retains an interest in clinical anaesthesia at the Angliss and Werribee Mercy Hospitals.

In his leisure time he plays the tuba in the Stonnington Brass Band and the Australian Doctors Orchestra. His ambition is to play his sousaphone with the "Stonnington Stompers" jazz band.

What Happens When I Contact the VDHP

If you are a new enquirer to our service, you will probably contact us by phone or email, or perhaps make a visit to our office, which is always open during normal business hours. Your first contact will be with **Debbie Dunstall**, who is our office manager and receptionist. In some cases which require information or non-clinical advice, Debbie may be able to provide the appropriate information.

In all clinical matters, you will be referred to our Medical Director, **Jack Warhaft**. Jack will arrange to see the new doctor or medical student as soon as possible.

Urgent cases are contacted immediately and are seen within 24 hours. In other cases an appointment is made within a few days. (Sometimes the problem can be dealt with on the telephone, however the doctor is always encouraged to make a personal appointment). An initial assessment will be carried out, and any appropriate referral

**Scan photo of
Dr Naham (Jack) Warhaft
Medical Director**

for further assessment and treatment is arranged. When indicated, Jack will then organise any aftercare and/or monitoring. All cases are followed up to determine whether the doctor-patient is satisfied with his or her management, and to monitor progress.

Jack and Debbie are most sensitive to all aspects of confidentiality and anonymity. The VDHP office is

situated in a building which houses a wide variety of services; doctors have a whole range of reasons for being at the Aikenhead Building. We have our own private waiting area; no-one need feel embarrassed or apprehensive when visiting our office.

As already mentioned, we are a fully independent program, and above all else, **we can assure you of anonymity and confidentiality at all times.**

Rural Doctors

The **Victorian Doctors Health Program** believes that rural doctors experience a similar range of health problems to their urban colleagues. We are concerned, however, that there is an even greater reluctance of doctors to present for treatment in smaller communities where resources may be more limited. We have been encouraged by the very many good outcomes that have related to early presentation. Accordingly we place great emphasis on the fact that no concern is 'too trivial'.

Even in the smallest of rural communities, interventions have been arranged and successful assessment and treatment carried out while still maintaining strict confidentiality

for the doctor concerned. For problems that may require ongoing management, appropriate after-care and follow-up is arranged. Family support is provided where indicated.

If you have concerns regarding yourself or another doctor, you are encouraged to contact the **VDHP**. **Anonymous enquiries are welcome.** We will endeavor to assist with advice and information, and to arrange an appropriate intervention when indicated. *We will come to any part of Victoria to provide appropriate clinical support.*

We are most willing to visit your area to introduce our program. (see *Request Form* on page 4)

VDHP Anniversary Dinner

On Monday 24 June the VDHP celebrated its First Anniversary Dinner in a private room of a restaurant. It was attended by 40 people — program participants in recovery from drug or alcohol problems, their partners and VDHP staff. Our guest speaker was Graeme, a former barrister who, as a result of his alcohol dependent lifestyle had found himself the recipient of a long prison sentence. He described his tragic demise, his subsequent recovery and the rehabilitation of all aspects of his life. He has now been sober for 20 years, and is a very successful businessman. Graeme was

entertaining and informative, and a powerful example of what can be achieved in recovery from substance abuse.

Two of our participants celebrated their own first anniversary of recovery, and a further five were presented with awards marking their successful re-entry to medical practice. (The VDHP regards the recognition of recovery milestones as an important part of the program.)

All of the guests enjoyed the evening. The participants and their partners can now look forward to the **2002 VDHP Retreat**, which will be held over a weekend in late October.

“Doctor Burnout”

In the first year of operation, the **VDHP** has assisted in approximately 30 cases of what we describe as “stress/emotional problems”. In our experience many tend to fit a pattern. Aged between early 40’s and mid to late 50’s, usually male, these doctors are ‘fed up’ with their lot in life. Their professional lives have become stale. They feel that their patients no longer appreciate them and that the financial rewards of long hours and stressful work are inadequate. They feel frustrated by the demands of the bureaucracy and the omnipresent threat of litigation. Often there are family or financial problems that add to the burden.

These problems cause a great deal of distress to the doctor who, more often than not, ‘soldiers on’ in the belief that the problem will go away, or that he or she will be able to deal with them alone. On the other hand, a great deal can be done to alleviate these concerns. The **VDHP** has compiled a list of specialist practitioners who have expertise in the management of troubled doctors. We will arrange for an appropriate assessment and any subsequent treatment, and will conduct follow-up to assess progress. *Confidentiality is assured.*

Our experience to date has been that practically all of these doctors have obtained substantial benefit from contacting our Program. We encourage early presentation, as untreated emotional problems can not only cause severe distress, they may progress to more serious psychiatric disorders.

In Forthcoming Issues

- *Family support
- *Hospital ‘Wellness Programs’
- *More on Confidentiality
- * Drug Abuse - how the VDHP can help

Questions

We will attempt to answer questions of concern to our readers. Please write or email ...



**Contact us on
03 9495 6011
for more
information**

If you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact the Victorian Doctors Health Program on
03 9495 6011
Or email us at
vdhp@vdhp.org.au.

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VDHP PRESENTATION REQUEST

More Information about the VDHP?

Assistance in development of Hospital Wellness Programs.

The **VDHP** would be pleased to make a presentation to your hospital or professional group. Please contact our office and we will adapt a presentation to your needs.

Date of request: _____

Name of organisation: _____

Likely Date/s of Presentation: 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Primary Audience: _____ Approx number of attendees: _____

Location of Presentation: _____

Contact Person: _____ Contact Number: _____

Email: _____

Once this request form is received by **VDHP**,
we will contact you directly to begin program arrangements.