

a response to COVID.

building a stronger healthcare workforce



professionals and experts have their say.

Australia's success in reining in the worst of COVID-19 owes much to the country's medical, allied health, and aged care teams' dedication, professionalism, and resourcefulness. Whilst the aged care sector bore the brunt of the outbreak, allied health professionals have also had to learn to be resilient in rapidly adjusting their practice to provide online support.

The crisis has taken a considerable physical and mental toll on frontline personnel, highlighting the vital importance of resilience, and the workforce wellbeing and operational agility that underpin it. Drawing on interviews with healthcare professionals and Randstad sector experts, we look at the lessons from this ultimate test of resilience and how to apply them in your organisation.



COVID-19 has left a trail of tragedy and turmoil across the world.

Australia has felt the terrible impact, with more than 900 deaths¹ and unemployment rising to 7%² at the time of writing. But it could so easily have been worse. Australia's COVID-19 mortality rate (3.63 per 100,000) is a fraction of the UK's (82.9) and the USA's (78.49), albeit New Zealand is lower at 0.51³. However, this type of statistic never tells the full story.



<u>0.51</u>	NZ
<u>3.63</u>	AU
<u>78.49</u>	US
<u>82.9</u>	UK

“A remarkable characteristic of the COVID-19 response has been the unprecedented levels of cooperation between private and public hospitals, and state and federal governments, as well as medical technology manufacturers and suppliers,” says Crystal Howell, Client Services Director at Randstad Sourceright.

So, what’s worked well, what hasn’t and what can we learn?

If we look at the positives, everyone who has followed social distancing guidance, handwashing and wearing masks has made an immense difference. This was supported by early imposition of travel restrictions and clear channels for expert input into the Government response.

Australia also has some important natural advantages in dealing with a pandemic like COVID-19. These include no land borders. The country also has a lower population density through which disease can quickly spread compared to countries like the UK and US⁴, though more crowded urban areas have felt the impact⁵.

Ultimately, Australia’s healthcare system demonstrated its resilience despite the huge pressures. Private and public provision and state and federal authorities weren’t always as linked as they could be prior to the crisis. But once COVID-19 infection and hospitalisation rates began to rise, the need for coordination was recognised and acted upon.

Moreover, what would otherwise have been years of development have been packed into a few months. Crystal Howell highlights the value of virtual telehealth services in enabling general practice and outpatient consultations to keep running and helping to reduce the backlog building up in non-COVID 19 referral and treatment. Emerging opportunities include remote patient screening to create a so-called ‘virtual hospital’.



feeling the strain.

The strains have shown despite the success.

A phone line for concerned healthcare and aged care workers, which was set up by ABC News, has heard alarming stories about exhaustion, personal protective equipment (PPE) shortages and insufficient training in infection control⁶.

Even after these initial problems were gradually resolved, stress levels have pushed many frontline workers to the limits. A study published in Australasian Psychiatry reveals significant levels of anxiety (20% of participating healthcare workers), depression (21%) and post-traumatic stress disorder (29%)⁷. This not only reflects concerns about workloads, working conditions and infection risks but also fears among staff that they could transmit the disease to families and colleagues.

20% anxiety



21% depression



29% PTSD



“We tend to think about the downside of this, but people find strength and find hope and something to live for and grow into, and that can be positive.” Tracy Churchill

The burnout risks highlighted during the pandemic underline the extent to which wellbeing is as important as management and resources in fostering resilience. Moreover, studies suggest that these three pillars of resilience are intrinsically linked⁸. Poor management and lack of resources can turn an inherently stressful environment into a toxic one.

However, if people feel they have a clear sense of purpose, direction and support, stress can actually be affirming. Talking about post-traumatic growth in an interview for this report, Tracy Churchill, a nursing manager, said: “We tend to think about the downside of this, but people find strength and find hope and something to live for and grow into, and that can be positive.”

Studies also suggest that this positive attitude is closely linked to physical wellbeing and can boost immune systems⁹. It can also enhance mental health by improving the ability to bounce back, deal with stress and handle setbacks. Resilient employees are, in turn, more adaptable and willing to take on new roles.



fostering
resilience.



stress the positives.

How then can your organisation foster this resilience? The five-point plan we set out here is primarily focused on healthcare, allied health and aged care professionals, but could also apply to other public and private sectors:

To help people develop a positive attitude, Tracy Churchill believes that it's important to teach them that "stress can be motivating and helpful". She also highlights the importance of "a strong focus early in people's career on self-care, so when these things happen, we have a huge sense of resilience to build on and grow from".

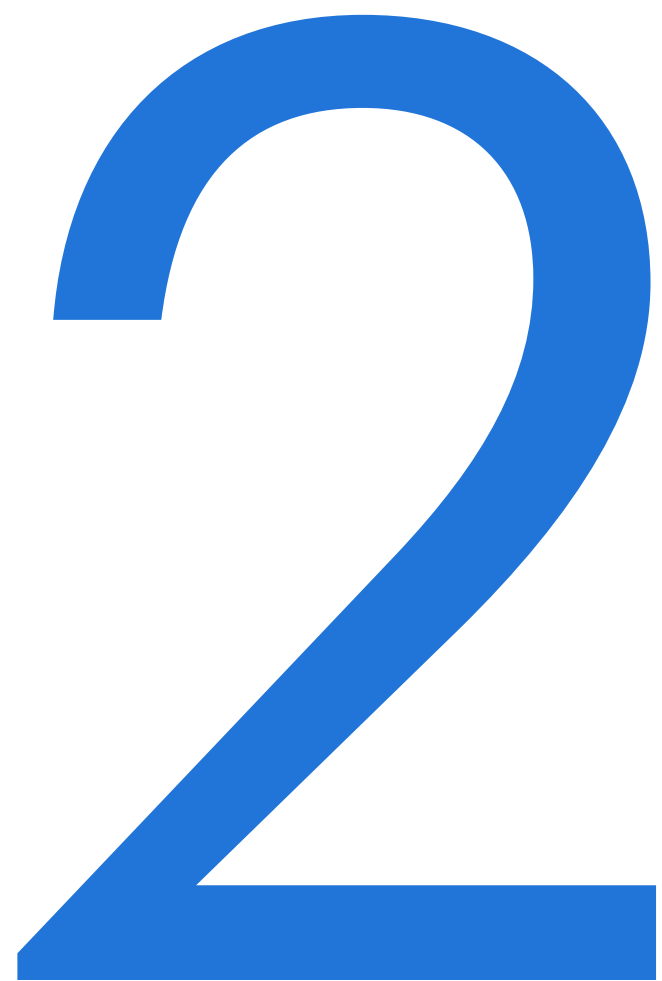


engage and empower.

It's in times of upheaval that the full value of workforce engagement and empowerment come to the fore. In an interview for this report, Annette Scott, Executive Director Allied Health, Adjunct Professor University of Queensland, emphasised the importance of talking openly to staff about what lies ahead and listening to their individual ideas and concerns to help them prepare for a dangerous and disruptive situation like the pandemic and build up their confidence:

"We go out to medical units- we sit with the staff and their managers and explain to them that if we experience an outbreak, here's how we'll manage it to an individual level. It's about reassuring the workforce that there is an individual recognition of their particular situation, we won't be putting them in harm's way and that their safety is our utmost concern." Ms Scott also underlines the value of involving people in key decisions. "We want to bring them into the whole planning process and include them in the journey – this is what it will look like," she said.

The COVID-19 outbreak has been marked out by the amount of political and media comment. What has often been missing are the perspectives of the healthcare and aged care workers at the sharp end. The Health Worker Voices channel, launched by the University of Melbourne, encourages workers to record and share their thoughts and experiences. This is a chance to swap notes on solutions and innovations, as well as a range of coping strategies as part of what the university wants to be a "cathartic" exchange.



reach out to safeguard mental health.

3

The mental health impact of the pandemic impinges on patients, staff and how they engage with families and friends. These areas of work, home and patient care are inexorably linked from a mental health perspective and should be managed holistically.

Tracy Churchill was on maternity leave when the COVID-19 outbreak began, and by the time she returned to work, it was a full emergency. She describes the difficulties of getting used to a new way of working. “When I came back everything was different; we had to wear masks and goggles, we couldn’t really see each other’s facial expressions, it was harder for people to hear us, it was very restricted,” she says.

But she feels the restrictions were even harder for the patients, who were not able to have visitors. “The saddest thing was the loneliness among people in hospitals. They’re in a vulnerable position when they really need their friends and families around... To overcome this, we tried to spend more time with them, going out of our way to write a message on the whiteboard for when they wake up, offering cups of teas, going above and beyond what we already do...

We also prioritised things like phone calls, zooms with their families, and for people who were not digitally amazing we would help set up those things to keep them connected,” she continues.



Kelly Schumacher is a mental health nurse who works as a complex case manager for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Like many people across the country, Ms Schumacher has been working remotely. Having led resilience workshops at her previous post within the Australian Defence Force, this is a subject she knows well. Ms Schumacher highlights the importance of reaching out to colleagues.

“We need to recognise the individual, social and environmental factors,” she said in an interview for this report. This includes recognising that they may feel isolated and would benefit from daily check-ins. “Even talking about something as light as reality TV was a good balance to the emotionally draining work that we do. It’s a great way to bring the team together and engage the team,” she said. Ms Schumacher recognises the positive impact these interactions have had on her own sense of wellbeing. “I have never felt more valued and part of a team.”

Our interviewees talked about the importance of stepping away from work and finding ways to relieve the stress as they look to strengthen wellbeing and build resilience. “I’ve started gardening, and people are taking up little hobbies and baking sourdough bread and being immersed in the activities...Teams that have people in them that really care about each other and reach out just work so well in times like this,” says Tracy Churchill.

“From a mental health perspective, can you take time out and focus on those things that bring you joy,” says Kelly Schumacher. “Avoid excessive alcohol. Spend time with family. Switch off the computer. Read less news; it can be stressful. Be aware of your capabilities and limitations. Get support from your family and employer. Try and stay engaged with others. Keep moving. Working your body is extremely important for your mental health,” she continues.

strengthen agility and prevention.

A recurring theme in our interviews is the link between agility and resilience. “We’ve learnt that we can be very agile and very flexible and respond rapidly with the information we’ve got... In Australia, we reduced things like surgery that can wait... to release some capacity in the health workforce to meet the tsunami of COVID that was coming our way,” says Annette Scott.

Australia already had severe shortages of healthcare, allied health and aged care personnel going into the COVID-19 emergency.¹⁰ The pandemic has exacerbated this as a result of staff required to self-isolate. Looking in 2021, we face increased demand as medical teams roll out vaccines, treat patients affected by ‘Long COVID’ and seek to clear the backlog of elective surgery and other cases that have been postponed. With travel restrictions in place, bringing in staff from outside the country will be difficult.

Even once borders are opened, this won’t be a quick fix.

So how can we respond to surges in demand more quickly and effectively? Randstad’s Crystal Howell believes that the pandemic has highlighted the value of a flexible, contingent workforce capable of bending and flexing as it followed the curve of infection. Randstad Sourceright has been working with the Ministry of Health to create a credentialed pandemic surge healthcare workforce.



Further Government-sponsored initiatives include a newly approved role for final year medical students as Assistants in Medicine, which can support patient to clinician ratios in the event of a spike.

Looking ahead, we as a country need to encourage more people to choose careers in healthcare, allied health and aged care. It's also important to tackle the high rates of stress-related issues highlighted earlier and the risk of people leaving the sector as a result. A systematic approach to wellbeing is a critical part of this.

Prevention is also better than cure. COVID-19 has highlighted not only the vulnerability of people with pre-existing conditions but also the disproportionate impact on disadvantaged communities¹¹. This underlines the need to expand healthcare prevention and advice, tackle the social issues affecting health outcomes and step up the training and recruitment needed to support this.



embrace technology.

5

Digital technologies can help healthcare, allied health and aged care workers to make more productive use of their time and resources while opening the way for virtual hospitals in communities that are remote or affected by lockdown. Further opportunities include 'digital front doors' that open the way to remote consultations and monitoring apps.

The pandemic has "realigned where we need to be" said Annette Scott. You can't do what you've done in the past, so how else can you do it? She cites the value of virtual engagement within her role of securing supplies and managing mobile testing. It's shown how much can be done virtually, which before would have required long travel times. "Where we can, we need to convert to a virtual service or delivery platform," she said.

The Australian Medtech sector's work with the Government in areas such as the development and supply of testing kits and ventilator components is recognised as a model internationally. "The flexibility achieved through the use of technology is the legacy of the current crisis and will become an expected part of 'business as usual,'" said Crystal Howell.



**heroes not
superheroes.**

Vaccines now offer a glimmer of light at the end of the COVID-19 tunnel. But the world will never be the same again.

Within healthcare, allied health and aged care, as elsewhere, the pandemic has proved that necessity is the mother of invention – new ways of working, new ways of engaging and new ways of harnessing technology. It's important to sustain this momentum.

The pandemic has also shown that healthcare, allied health and aged care workers are heroes, but they are not superheroes. They want to make a difference, but they are human like everyone else. To help them deal with stress, to respond to crises, they want to be sure that their voices will be heard, their wellbeing will be supported, and their individual needs will be recognised and respected. This is the essence of workforce resilience.



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