

Discovery Health Medical Students Helpline - Now Just A Phone Call Away - 0800 323 323

Many of you will remember the many long days and nights working and studying to complete your medical degrees. For those with good support systems, these years although tough, pass without too much undue stress. But for many medical students, interns and trainee doctors their studies, combined with personal stress, mental illness and other emotional issues can become insurmountable. And along with other students over the last few years they have added to the growing statistic of student suicides.

According to a 2010 World Health Organisation report, worldwide, suicide is among the top three causes of death for people aged 15 - 44 years and is the second leading cause of death amongst university students. South Africa has the eighth highest rate of suicide in the world and young adults (19-24) are considered to be the most at-risk group for depression and suicidality (including suicidal thinking; self-harming behaviour and suicide attempts).

With this in mind a new 24-hour Discovery Health dedicated Medical Students Helpline, staffed by SADAG's fully trained counsellors has been launched.

Dr Maurice Goodman, Chief Medical Officer of Discovery Health and Trustee of the Discovery Foundation and Fund says, "Particularly given the huge shortage of doctors in this country, South Africa's significant disease burden and the broader impact of this on our country as a whole, it's a national imperative to

invest in our future doctors. Discovery is pleased to be able to support this vital initiative as an important part of our investment in our country's healthcare system."

While medical students devote their lives to the science of helping others, all too often the stress of insurmountable study demands, sleep deprivation, financial pressure and social isolation makes campus life a struggle.

As Tshegofatso Ubisi, Chairperson of the Medical Students' Council at the University of the Witwatersrand explains, medical students with mental illness have very poor help-seeking behaviour. "In our faculty, mental health is the norm," he says. "Many turn to substance abuse as a way of dealing with whatever stressors and issues they may have."

"If depression is not dealt with soon enough, it can eventually result in suicide attempts or suicide," adds Zane Wilson, founder and director of SADAG. "As our medical students are the future of healthcare in South Africa, it's imperative we offer counselling and intervention to ease their burdens

Johannesburg psychiatrist and SADAG board member Dr Frans Korb

believes the new 24-hour Discovery Health Medical Students Helpline will go a long way towards addressing this problem. "While most campus student support facilities are walk-in offices, the Medical Students Helpline offers an anonymous, all-hours private service to those in need. This will remove a student's fear of being discriminated against if they have a mental illness or suicidal ideation."

Medical students are more likely to be honest about their symptoms if they don't have to worry about their professors, peers, patients or medical board finding out. "Trained helpline counsellors will be able to provide follow-ups, educational material about mental illness plus referrals to other medical professionals if necessary," Dr Korb explains.

Cassey Chambers, Operations Director of SADAG, adds they will also be able to provide crisis intervention, especially in the instance of suicide that requires emergency treatment. "We hope through the dedicated Discovery Health Medical Students Helpline, we can reduce the number of dropouts, provide more supportive services, assist in crisis situations and prevent suicides," Chambers says.

This 24-hour service provides free telephonic counselling via a toll-free helpline 365 days a year. Contact 0800 323 323 or visit www.sadag.org.

