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\$6.7M mental health boost for 100,000+ health professional students

Thousands of health professional students have had their mental health boosted after accessing a new Australian Government \$6.7m funded psychological distress training initiative.

Australian-based global health promotion leader Mental Health First Aid International (MHFAI) has designed a new online Health Professional (HP) education program for student doctors, nurses, midwives, and allied health professionals, with course material designed specifically for the health professional context.

Assistant Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Emma McBride today officially launched the landmark project aiming to reach more than 115,000 students over the next four years.

Led by three Councils of Deans (Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand, the Australasian Council of Deans of Health Sciences, and the Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery), the initiative aims to boost students' mental wellbeing, increase skills for self-care and peer-to-peer support, and prepare students to sustain a healthy career in healthcare.

More than 10,000 students have enrolled in the program since May 2024, with more than 3,000 already completing the early training. Over 80% say they have improved confidence to start a mental health first aid conversation with a fellow student who has signs of mental distress.

James Joseph, a medical student at UNSW who has undertaken the training, said "We are all aware of the higher rates of mental health issues rampant amongst healthcare professionals compared to other fields. The MHFA training help us develop the skills to recognise signs of distress in ourselves and our peers and provide effective support. The training fosters a culture of awareness and early intervention, empowering us as future health professionals to prioritise mental well-being in both personal and clinical settings."

President of Medical Deans, Professor Michelle Leech AM welcomed the funding and stressed the importance of students having this learning opportunity.

"Health professional students themselves can be at heightened risk of mental health issues, facing stresses during their studies and learning in high pressure clinical settings. Being able to recognise the signs that either they or a friend or colleague might be struggling and in need of help and support, and knowing how to access that, is vital and can make all the difference."

The online training course has been specifically designed for health professional students and teaches how to recognise early signs and provide initial support to a peer or other adult who may be experiencing a mental health problem or mental health crisis, until professional help is received or the crisis resolves. Students who participate in the program can then complete the subsequent facilitated part of the training if they wish, to get MHFAI accreditation lasting three years. This new funding will also support over 110 staff based at the universities involved to be trained as Licensed MHFAI Instructors.

Professor Michelle Lincoln, Deputy Chair of the Australian Council of Deans of Health Sciences said: "The provision of this critical training across allied health, nursing, midwifery and medical students means they will share common knowledge, terminology and approaches which will allow them to support each other as they learn and work together."

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Professor Karen Strickland, Chair of the Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery, highlighted that “this online teaching of foundational and practical first aid skills for mental health is an invaluable addition to the health and wellbeing support services that are available to students at their university.”

MHFAI CEO Angus Clelland said: “Equipping students with these skills via the new MHFAI HP program will not only ensure they can understand their own mental health during their studies and provide timely support to their peers, but it will also create a foundation for a healthier, more resilient workforce.

“We are seeing an early remarkable return on the Australia Government investment: with most seeing improvements in confidence and skills to support a fellow student and look after themselves,” he said.

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*The **Australian Council of Deans of Health Sciences Limited (ACDHS)** is the peak representative organisation for Australian universities that provide undergraduate education in the clinical allied health sciences.*

ACDHS is a forum for representation, coordination, and information sharing, and aims to strengthen the education and training of allied health practitioners in Australia to meet the needs of their communities.

<https://acdhs.edu.au/>

*The **Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery (Australia & New Zealand) (CDNM)** is the peak organisation that represents the Deans and Heads of the Schools of Nursing and Midwifery in universities that offer undergraduate and postgraduate programs in nursing and midwifery throughout Australia and New Zealand.*

<https://cdnm.edu.au/>

***Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand Inc.** represents and supports the 24 medical schools across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand in their cutting-edge medical education, work-integrated training, and research to recruit, develop and nurture outstanding medical graduates to enable our communities to continue to access world-class health services.*

Medical Deans’ [annual survey of medical graduates](#) provides valuable information and insights on the make-up of our future doctors, including demographics, education, experience, and future career preferences.

<https://medicaldeans.org.au/>

***Mental Health First Aid International** is a global, purpose-driven provider of mental health first aid education that equips individuals with the knowledge and skills to provide support when it matters most. MHFAI aims to improve mental health literacy, reduce stigma, create a more compassionate, informed society and build community capacity to support people experiencing mental health problems. <https://www.mhfa.com.au/>*

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About the training:

The MHFA for Health Professional Students course teaches how to provide initial support to a peer or other adult who may be experiencing a mental health problem or mental health crisis, until professional help is received or the crisis resolves. Students learn about the signs and symptoms of common mental health problems in students and other adults, how to recognise and respond to an emerging or worsening mental health problem, and the treatments and supports available.

The course teaches students how to apply mental health first aid across a range of common mental health problems and crisis situations, including:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Substance use problems
- Suicidal thoughts and behaviours
- Panic attacks
- Non-suicidal self-injury
- Traumatic events.

The course does not teach students how to provide professional mental health support to patients.

Early key evaluation findings from the Program

From 3,321 students who completed the eLearning component of the MHFA for Health Professional Students course, between May 2024 and September 2024.

Students Helping others

- 78% showed an improvement in their confidence to initiate a mental health first aid conversation with a peer who has signs of mental health problems.

Student Self-care

- More than half (56.57%) showed an improvement in their emotional and mental readiness to approach and assist someone with mental health problems or a crisis.
- More than half of learners (57%) showed an improvement in their ability to use a range of self-care strategies after challenging or difficult conversations.

Student Confidence seeking help for self

At the end of the eLearning, we found that:

- 92% showed high confidence seeking help from trusted friends or family for their own mental health.
- 93% showed high confidence to seek appropriate professional help for their own mental health.
- 84% showed high confidence disclosing their own mental health experiences to seek support from the university or a professional placement setting. For the latter, more than half (52%) improved their confidence as a result of the eLearning, a rate of improvement of nearly 19%.

Instilling hope for the future

At the end of the eLearning, we found that:

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- Most (96.53%) reported believing that a person with a mental illness can be successful professionally treated (a rate of improvement of 5% from pre-course results).
- Most (97.28%) reported believing that people with mental illness can be hopeful about their future (a rate of improvement of 4% from pre-course results).

Satisfaction

- Most (95% average across variables) were satisfied with the eLearning. They found the content clear and relevant, easy to follow and navigate, with engaging learning and highly regarded quizzes and assessments.

Recommended

Most learners (96%) either recommended or highly recommended the eLearning training to others.