



*Webinar 20 May 2026*

## When Things Go Wrong:

### Navigating Adverse Events, Complaints and Notifications

When things go wrong in medicine, the impact on doctors can be profound. This webinar explored the emotional, psychological and professional consequences of adverse events, complaints, notifications and other career setbacks. It provided a practical framework for understanding what doctors experience during these periods and how colleagues, workplaces and support services can help.

#### Key points discussed

##### *Adverse events affect doctors as well as patients*

Medicine is inherently complex and demanding. Even highly skilled clinicians working in well-functioning systems will encounter situations where outcomes are not as hoped. These experiences can be deeply distressing and may affect confidence, wellbeing and professional identity.

##### *There is often a predictable emotional response*

Doctors commonly experience a sequence of reactions after an adverse event, complaint or notification. These may include:

- Shock, disbelief and confusion
- Repeatedly replaying events and questioning decisions
- Fear about professional, financial or reputational consequences
- Self-doubt and loss of confidence
- Gradual adaptation and recovery over time

Understanding these reactions can help normalise the experience and reduce feelings of isolation.

##### *Shame can be particularly damaging*

Many doctors do not simply think, "I made a mistake." Instead, they begin to think, "I am a bad doctor" or "I have failed as a person."

The webinar explored the distinction between guilt and shame, and how shame can lead to withdrawal, self-criticism, avoidance behaviours or anger. Recognising and naming these responses is an important step towards recovery.

#### *Professional identity can make setbacks harder*

For many doctors, medicine is more than a job. It is a central part of their identity. As a result, complaints, notifications and adverse events can feel like a challenge not only to competence but also to personal worth.

This can make it difficult for doctors to seek support or maintain perspective during periods of distress.

#### *Support from colleagues matters*

One of the strongest themes of the webinar was the importance of connection.

Doctors experiencing professional difficulties often benefit most from trusted colleagues who can:

- Listen without judgement
- Maintain confidentiality
- Provide practical support
- Help them access appropriate professional assistance
- Remind them that a difficult event does not define their entire career

Often the most valuable contribution is simply being present and allowing someone space to talk.

#### *Basic needs should not be overlooked*

When doctors are distressed, attention often turns immediately to investigations, reports and regulatory processes. The webinar highlighted the importance of first addressing more fundamental needs such as:

- Sleep
- Nutrition
- Time away from work where appropriate
- Social connection
- Access to a GP and other supports

These foundations help restore the capacity to think clearly and make good decisions.

#### *Recovery takes time*

Investigations, complaints and notifications can continue for months or years. During this period, ongoing support is important.

Checking in, remembering significant dates, offering practical assistance and maintaining contact can make a substantial difference to a colleague's wellbeing.

### *Doctors are more than their worst day*

A key message throughout the webinar was that difficult events are part of medical practice and do not define a doctor's value, character or future.

With support, perspective and time, many doctors are able to recover, learn from the experience and continue making important contributions to their patients, colleagues and communities.

### Main presenter:

*Professor Helen Wilcox* is Dean of the Medical School at the University of Western Australia and Medical Director of the Doctors' Health Advisory Service Western Australia. She is a general practitioner with extensive experience in doctors' health, medical education and supporting medical students and doctors through professional and personal challenges.

### Panellists:

*Dr Kathryn Hutt* is a general practitioner, medical educator and Medical Director of Doctors' Health NSW. She works in clinical practice, delivers education programs for medical students and doctors, and has a longstanding interest in doctors' health, wellbeing, leadership and psychological safety.

*Dr Margaret Kay AM* is Chair of the Doctors' Health Alliance, a general practitioner and a national leader in doctors' health. She has worked extensively in medical education, advocacy and the development of doctors' health services across Australia.

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### Watch the webinar:

<https://vimeo.com/1201295457?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

This webinar was hosted by the Doctors' Health Alliance as part of its national education program supporting the health and wellbeing of doctors and medical students.