

Media release: ethicists discuss epidemic of moral distress and burnout in healthcare

Moral distress and burnout are at crisis proportions in the health sector, say two bioethicists.

The Plunkett Centre for Ethics at Australian Catholic University will host a webinar on Wednesday on the topic of moral distress, hope and healing in healthcare. The webinar aims to critically analyse the crisis of burnout and distress and to identify solutions for the high rates of mental illness and burnout among health professionals.

Kate Jackson Meyer, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard and one of the webinar presenters, notes that doctors have one of the highest rates of burnout of any profession. “Compared to all high school grads, physicians are 36% more likely to develop burnout”, Dr Jackson Meyer says. Signs of burnout include exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment.

Moral distress, which arises when a health professional’s moral agency is subject to institutional constraints, is difficult to identify but also appears common among health professionals. Dr Jackson Meyer will review survey tools to identify moral distress in the clinic and will discuss ways in which spirituality can help health professionals overcome it.

Dr Marija Kirjanenko, an emergency physician in Melbourne who will also present at the webinar, worries that we have no validated methods for helping health professionals recover from moral distress. Dr Kirjanenko believes that Australia can learn from best practice globally on supporting health professionals who are struggling to cope: “we only recently started actively talking about wellness and self-care among doctors and nurses”.

Wednesday’s webinar will take place via Zoom at 11:30am AEST. To RSVP, contact Pip Wilson at plunkett@acu.edu.au.