

Caring for the carers: Online panel to discuss emerging impacts of COVID-19 on health care workforce

Catholic healthcare providers are at the heart of the COVID-19 response around the world, but what happens when their frontline workers report extreme burnout, fatigue, and withdrawal?

Executive Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at Australian Catholic University Professor Suzanne Chambers AO said as the pandemic moves into its third year, new research was emerging about the impact on health workers, and the results were concerning.

“In healthcare workers, the stress associated with increased workloads and scarce resources, and the long duration of the pandemic, has resulted in higher levels of depression, anxiety and burn out,” Professor Chambers said.

“Healthcare workers are in the front line—not only to respond to disease but also to human suffering. But witnessing this suffering takes a toll.”

Professor Chambers, who is a trained health psychologist based at ACU Brisbane campus, is not alone in her concern for healthcare workers.

Next month Professor Chambers will join an online panel of international health experts to discuss the wellbeing of health care workers and to explore possible strategies and solutions for the Catholic sector.

The free event is being hosted by ACU and Catholic Health Australia (CHA) on February 11 to mark the 30th World Day of the Sick. The panel will also feature Senior Director of Mission Innovation and Integration for the Catholic Health Association of the United States, Dr Dennis Gonzales, and Chief of Mental Health and Outreach Services for Cabrini Health, Sharon Sherwood.

Professor Chambers said the panel would provide an opportunity to discuss ACU’s commitment to training health professionals who were “anchored in human values” and who recognised the dignity of all persons.

“The specific role of ACU is to best prepare our graduates for the post-pandemic world and we do this through ensuring we cover relevant skills such as clinical reasoning underpinned by sound ethical decision-making tools and a solid values base.”

February 11’s panel discussion will be moderated by Brigid Meney, CHA’s Director of Strategy and Mission.

Ms Meney said the health and aged care sectors would benefit enormously from formal discussions, like the World Day of the Sick panel, on how to care for our carers.

“Our health and aged care members are reporting significant stresses among their workforces. It is clear that whatever the form, COVID will remain with us for the foreseeable future. The duty of care that we owe to our patients, residents and clients also extends to our employees who deserve our support as they continue to go about their work in extremely challenging circumstances.

“Having our sector come together to examine potential solutions is testament to the power of our mission and how it unites us in a common cause. I look forward to hearing our panel’s views on this important issue.”

Executive Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Theology Dermot Nestor said the online panel would echo and affirm Pope Francis’ encouraging words to healthcare workers in his message marking the 30th World Day of the Sick.

“Pope Francis gives a special mention to healthcare workers and volunteers in his message for World Day of the Sick, affirming their service as a sign of charity and of mercy,” Professor Nestor said.

“Now, we are increasingly seeing healthcare workers become patients themselves; succumbing to the physical and emotional distress associated with battling a two-year pandemic. As research continues to shed light on the

increasing need for healthcare workers to receive care and themselves to be shown mercy, ACU hopes to make a positive contribution in raising awareness around the need to protect the mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing of our COVID-19 frontline heroes.”

World Day of the Sick was first instituted by Pope St John Paul II on 13 May, 1992, and as an encouragement to the people of God, Catholic health institutions and civil society to be increasingly attentive to the sick and to those who care for them.

The 2022 World Day of the Sick online panel discussion hosted by ACU and CHA will be held on February 11 2022 at 12pm (AEDT)/11am (AEST).

Registration is essential by Tuesday 8 February 2022 at acu.edu.au/WDOS2022.

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