

Dementia at work

Dealing with colleagues whose minds are failing can be difficult – and it’s going to get worse. In Australia, there will be 600,000 dementia sufferers by 2020 and almost one million by 2050. According to UNSW’s Centre for Healthy Brain Ageing, this will come at an economic cost of up to 3 per cent of GDP. **RACHEL SETTI** writes.

The mere mention of dementia is often greeted by a pregnant pause and a response along the lines of: “It’s my worst fear”.

It’s no wonder. The statistics do not paint a pretty picture.

Dementia is an umbrella term for a number of disorders that can affect the neurological links in the brain. Impacting thinking and behaviour, the most common form is Alzheimers. A lot of literature links dementia to risk factors including diabetes, obesity, hypertension, depression, physical inactivity, smoking and cognitive inactivity. Symptoms include memory loss, confusion, difficulty completing everyday tasks, problems expressing language, reduced visual perception, and changes in mood.

Individuals aged 65 and over are most at risk, and perhaps it is for this reason that dementia at work often goes unrecognised and misdiagnosed. There is a plethora of advice to legal professionals on facilitating best outcomes for clients with dementia, but what about when the issue is closer to home – when failing cognitive ability lies with a peer, partner, or even yourself?

What should you do if you suspect you are suffering from impaired cognitive capacity? Firstly, avoid jumping to conclusions. Impaired cognition is often related to a breadth of conditions such as too little sleep, anxiety, burnout, poor

diet, depression and high alcohol intake, all of which are common among legal professionals.

Rather than worrying silently, visit your GP to discuss your symptoms and arrange a referral to a specialist. The results may not be as bad as you suspect. Sydney neurologist Dr Ron Granot, who works closely with dementia patients, reports that “when a patient self-reports reduced cognitive capacity, this often indicates a good level of self-awareness”.

What if the diagnosis is positive? Most forms of dementia are not reversible, although its impact can be best managed if detected early, often via medication and lifestyle changes. For example, physical activity enhances blood flow to the brain and is a notable factor in protecting against cognitive decline. This includes at least three sessions per week of aerobic and weight-based exercise. Also compelling is the positive correlation between mental activity and reduced risk of dementia, though Dr Granot adds that formal “brain training” is less relevant to legal professionals as their inherently complex jobs provide cognitive exercise by default. For those keen on gadgetry, Alzheimers Australia (in partnership with Bupa) has developed BrainyApp.

How to support a colleague

Avoid hasty judgment, invite open conversation and be prepared to listen.

Questions such as, “You don’t seem yourself, would you like to talk about it?” or “Are you okay? You seem to be concerned about something?” can be effective ways to start a conversation. Discuss the issues with a partner at the firm, a peer or HR – if you have noticed a problem, chances are they have, too.

If the matter becomes an issue of legal negligence, although there are no mandated procedures, contact the Law Society Professional Standards Department for guidance on how to work through the issue in accordance with professional requirements.

Whether you are concerned for yourself or another, reach out, get support and address the issue. Suffering in silence increases anxiety, and doesn’t reduce symptoms – in fact it is more likely to exacerbate them. **LSJ**

Lifeline for Lawyers

Crisis Support service 24 hours a day on 1800 085 062.

Alzheimer’s Australia

fightdementia.org.au

National Dementia Helpline

1800 100 500



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