

Workforce virus woes rise

BY GABRIEL FOWLER

THE number of people taking time off work due to illness is continuing to rise to near-record levels as health care workers brace for the next COVID-19 wave to peak.

People staying home with a fever, cough or other symptoms are in significantly higher than the five-year average, and well above 2020 and 2021 rates.

The strain is being felt by workers and employers alike, says Hunter Business CEO Bob Hawes, with anywhere between a 10 and 30 per cent impact on work forces in both small and large businesses.

"It's a real strain ... particularly in parts of allied health due to high exposure," he

said. "If you lose a key person, a whole production line might have to be stood down, or an entire restaurant. You can't just get people to fill in if they don't have the expertise."

Hunter Workers secretary Leigh Shears agreed, saying the workforce was under significant pressure right across the region.

"As we've seen, daily cases have shot through the roof, with extraordinary numbers of hospitalisations which are starting to creep up again... and the workforce, working people are exhausted or exhausting all avenues they have with regards to personal leave, and annual leave to make sure they do their bit not to pass the virus on," he said.

"We have put a call out encouraging employers to give consideration to all of these factors and support their workers in times of need."

"We've seen what the alternative is, in the early days of the pandemic with work place transmission of COVID-19 - it closed industries down, and I don't think anyone wants to see that happen again."

Likely more than one in 10 health workers are currently off sick, caring for someone who is ill, or in isolation, says NSW AMA president Dr Michael Bonning.

The official number of healthcare workers off work due to COVID is about 2500 out of a workforce of 140,000, Dr Bonning said. "But in actual fact its many times that



many people who are away from work because they're just the ones away for COVID reasons," he said.

"When you take into account other respiratory viruses and indirect reasons why people are off work, you find that that numbers

jumps up probably to double digit percentages, and that is borne out by anecdotal evidence from entire units who really struggle at different points of time because there are only small numbers of people with that specialised knowledge. The second

group is we see that all the time in general practices where half or more of the workforce is off."

Labour force statistics show that around 780,000 people across Australia were working fewer hours than usual due to illness in June, almost double the usual number seen at the start of winter, says Australian Bureau of Statistics head of labour statistics Bjorn Jarvis.

"In line with large numbers of COVID-19 cases in June, the number of people working reduced hours due to illness continued to be high," he said.

It was highest among people in the 40-54 age bracket, and down from a record level in May for those aged 25-39 and over 55.

A mental reset to reignite 'spark'

BY ANITA BEAUMONT

THE uncertainty of the past few years has left many feeling more stressed, more fatigued and less motivated.

But Newcastle psychologist Michelle Heaton hopes offering evidence-based tips and tricks to improve mental health and well-being will help those still "languishing" find their spark again.

"Everybody, no matter who they are, has been affected by the pandemic in some way," she said. "The fact it has been going on for so long has turned what was a stressful situation into chronic stress for a large majority of the population."

"Chronic stress leads to all kinds of issues, one of them being that feeling of languishing - that we're just not quite ourselves, and I see that everywhere."

Ms Heaton said even people who did not lose their jobs or face major personal issues during the pandemic could still be grappling with the loss of control and the consistent uncertainty of the past few years.

"I, like everyone else, found myself languishing after a couple of years of living with the pandemic," she said. "But I felt the normal tools and strategies I'd used in the past to look after my mental health and stay resilient weren't quite cutting it."

"So I started adding things I hadn't personally been



HOPE: Michelle Heaton, of Michelle Heaton Psychology & Consulting, is hosting a Mental Health Reset session to help people 'languishing' after the past few years of the pandemic at The Base Health in Hamilton on August 10. **Picture:** Marina Neil

doing - even though I knew they worked... It made a big difference.

"I wanted to share that and some of the science, some of the stats, and I wanted to educate people about some things that they might find helpful to turn this sense of languishing around."

Ms Heaton is hosting a "Mental Health Reset" session at The Base Health in Hamilton at 6pm on Wednesday, August 10.

"In 2020 they did a survey in Australia where 55 per cent of people said their mental health had been neg-

atively affected by the pandemic," she said. "By 2021, that had jumped up to 65 per cent. Then when people were asked whether they had any signs of pandemic fatigue, that jumped to 80 per cent."

But she said the "saddest" statistic of all was that for people who were already trying to manage a mental health issue, that figure jumped to 95 per cent.

"Those stats are telling me we are not bouncing back," she said. "My concern is we are telling ourselves there is something wrong with us, but no, this is collective.



Chronic stress leads to all kinds of issues, one of them being that sense of feeling that we are languishing - that we're just not quite ourselves, and I see that everywhere.

Michelle Heaton, Newcastle psychologist

There is a reason and it's going to take a bit of time to turn it around, but it is possible."

Ms Heaton hoped the session would not only give people some new mental

health strategies, but teach them how to put that new knowledge into action.

"This is for the general public. 'We're all in this together' was a bit of a

catchcry, but we've all been through the past few years, regardless of how it affected us," she said. "A lot of people are finding it hard to get in to see a psychologist currently."

"If you have never seen one before there are often wait lists. This could be helpful while waiting to get in."

Tickets for the Mental Health Reset cost \$25 each and \$15 for concessions via Humanitix.com.au, or \$30 at the door.

"But if you really, really want to come and you are struggling financially, give The Base a call," she said.