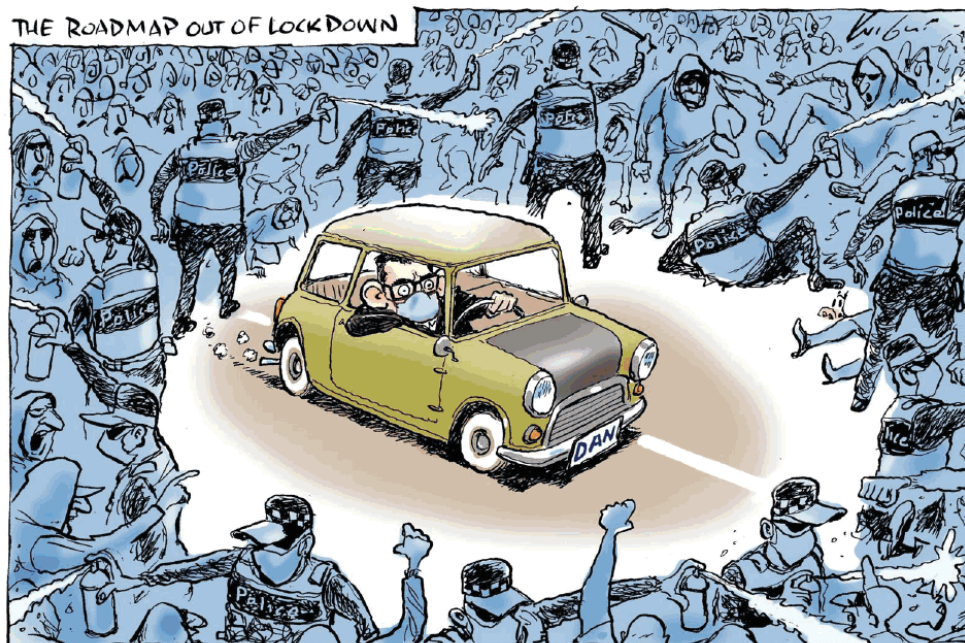


**MARK KNIGHT**

Hand-signed Knight cartoons are available for purchase from the Herald Sun shop. Send your request via email to [hshop@news.com.au](mailto:hshop@news.com.au)

**THE ROADMAP OUT OF LOCKDOWN**

# Mental health hazards lurk in the workplace

**T**HE devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are wreaking havoc on what was already a rapidly growing issue for Australian workers – poor mental health in the workplace.

Lockdowns have exposed that improving and maintaining the mental health of Australian workers is critical to creating healthier, happier and more productive workers.

Ensuring a mentally well workforce is also cost-effective. Before the pandemic, the cost of workplace mental health injury claims had doubled in the previous 20 years, and productivity losses had risen from \$12bn to \$39bn annually.

Increasingly, research is revealing that the mental health effect of this pandemic is ongoing, with issues such as depression, anxiety, PTSD and suicidal ideation becoming a chronic rather than an acute response to the uncertainty of a virus we cannot control.

Research conducted by the Monash University's Turner Institute for Brain and Mental Health has shown that these mental health injuries can arise from several Covid-related issues, and not just the existence of the virus in the community.

Lockdowns, unemployment and financial uncertainty, isolation and even confusion about health messaging can all result in serious, and often continuing mental health problems.

For some, the working-from-home practices adopted through the



**SHANTHA RAJARATNAM & JANE BURNS**

pandemic can feel more like living at work. Stress, fatigue and burnout are all harder to identify.

Video-conferencing has become our only means of connection and our informal in-person interactions have stopped as we attempt to slow the spread of the virus.

The issue of what is a workplace mental health injury has become even harder to identify and mitigate.

Why is it important that we detect mental health problems in the workplace early?

Mental health claims are expensive and complex to manage, resulting in poor outcomes for both the employee and the business.

More than 55 per cent of employees who go on leave because of psychosocial injury in Victoria for longer than six months do not return to work. This compares with just 23 per cent in people with physical workplace injuries.

So we need to rethink the ways we identify and manage mental health issues in the workplace.

Every organisation, school, factory, cafe needs to have ways to monitor, manage and respond to the mental health needs of its workers.

Dozens of surveys, toolboxes, pledges and campaigns exist but workers often do not engage with them, and leaders struggle to know how and when to take action.

Even when people are feeling burnt out, waking in the middle of the night and stressed, they do not put their hands up for help.

Early identification is important, but critical to breaking the cycle of poor workplace practice is reducing risk and preventing problems before the workplace becomes unsafe.

There's no doubt Covid-19 has exacerbated an existing crisis in workplace mental health in Australia and worldwide.

Current approaches to preventing mental health injuries in the workplace and managing risk are largely ad hoc and fragmented.

We need to build programs into the workplace to address the systems that are currently failing to protect the mental wellbeing of employees.

Technology offers tremendous opportunities to bring about a sea

change in the mental wellbeing landscape – if co-ordinated effectively across the individual, organisational and systems levels.

We need to implement effective and evidence-based technologies that, like protective clothing, act as protection against a mental health workplace injury.

As a community, we need to recognise mental health workplace injury in the same way we deal with other workplace exposure risks such as asbestos and unsafe building sites.

This preventive approach to workplace mental health would be cost-effective, drive productivity gains and improve the quality of life for all Australian workers.

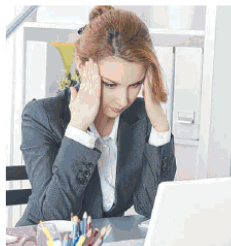
We need practical solutions that are designed with the employer, employees and the regulators.

We need staff trained in managing their own and others' mental wellbeing at work, and programs that detect those who are struggling and vulnerable.

We need more accurate data on the costs to support decision-making by leaders and to allow evaluation of possible solutions.

Without significant reforms, Australian workers are likely to experience worse mental health, suffer reduced overall wellbeing and be less productive in the workplace.

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**GARY MARTIN**

## Depart on your own terms

**I**T is an unavoidable part of growing older. At some stage, everyone expects you to retire – even if you are not ready to do so.

Mostly, you will be able to throw cold water on others' plans for you.

But when it's your boss giving you the vibes that it is time to power down the laptop for the last time, things are a bit more challenging.

Everyone wants to set their own retirement date, not least because those forced to call it quits prematurely often have difficulty adjusting to post-working life.

As awareness of ageism has grown, those wanting to shove older workers out the office door have realised it is unlawful to direct an employee to retire.

Not that this has dampened the enthusiasm of some bosses to try to remove those they consider long in the tooth or close to retirement age.

That's why it is important to recognise the seemingly benign signs of being pushed into retirement prematurely to form a plan to combat what often constitutes a covert act of ageism.

If the work you have been assigned lately seems less stimulating or more short-term in nature, it may not be a coincidence. It could be a sign your boss wants you gone sooner rather than later.

Alarm bells should sound if your application to undertake training has been rejected and you have been overlooked for a more senior role or urged to cut your hours.

The same is true if you are denied the resources you need to do the work, are the target of rude comments or silly jokes about your age or the boss seems less engaged with you than usual.

Watch out too if your retirement becomes a point of conversation around the office. That might mean your boss has dropped the topic into a discussion. Respond by making regular announcements that you "love what you do" and have no intention to retire any time soon.

Invest in yourself by staying up to date with industry trends. Offer to take on challenging roles that match your strengths and make yourself available to coach new or younger colleagues.

Most importantly, keep networks active and update your resume and online profile.

It is possible to fight stereotyping by planting seeds of doubt in the minds of an ageing boss or colleagues to arrest or delay their covert attempts to railroad you into early retirement.

Ultimately, start thinking about your retirement before your boss does the thinking for you – and stay on top of your career game.

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