

CONNECTIONS

Supporting all people to engage in activities they find meaningful

SUMMER 2021 | VOL 18 ISSUE 1



This is OT

Supporting Participation, Inclusion, and Independence

Creativity and transdisciplinary practice in aged care

How one man got his life back through OT

The history of a growing profession

Occupational
Therapy AUSTRALIA 

Staff concerns in an evolving Covid-safe workplace

Anna Pannuzzo, Director at WorkPlacePLUS

This article provides general, best-practice advice on three of the top Covid-related concerns of allied health practice owners. Employment arrangements for each workplace must be assessed on an individual basis.

Organisational landscapes are always adapting to a range of external influences, such as changes in technology, community attitudes, competition, legislation and climate. Even before Covid-19, we have seen how weather events such as bushfires and floods have impacted workplace operations in healthcare settings.

The Covid-19 pandemic has amped up the need for organisational agility, with employers and workers continuously adapting to new developments in Australia's evolving Covid-safe work culture. This can be particularly challenging for private practice owners, who must stay alert to changing rules and restrictions, and address staff concerns while continuing to maintain day-to-day operations.

It is important for private practice owners to refer regularly to best-practice guidance from the Fair Work Ombudsman and Work Health and Safety (WHS) authority in their jurisdiction.

Following below are three Covid-related staff concerns that allied health practice owners face, with corresponding general, best-practice advice.

Flexible working arrangements

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many allied health practitioners have enjoyed utilising telehealth as an alternative to face-to-face services. As Covid-19 restrictions ease, private practice owners may want their staff to return to "normal", while some practitioners and office staff may wish to maintain more flexible or hybrid work arrangements.

WHS jurisdictions around Australia agree that flexible work arrangements can promote a greater sense of work-life balance, which prevents work-related stress and burnout. The Fair Work Act 2009 outlines employee rights for flexible working arrangements, and how employers can manage these. For example, private practice owners must:

- Consider each employee request and try to agree on a new arrangement
- Grant or refuse the request in writing within 21 days
- Only refuse a request on reasonable business grounds

Private practice owners should take a best-practice approach to managing flexible working arrangements. This includes:

- Developing and promoting workplace policies on flexible working arrangements, managing remote employees, and ensuring practice managers are trained in these areas
- Considering how technology like telehealth can help
- Informing employees on options, providing support to adjust to changes, and mitigating the risk of one employee's

work arrangements negatively impacting another employee's workload

- Recognising that flexibility requirements may change, and scheduling regular reviews to address any issues or concerns promptly

Covid-safe workplaces

Private practice owners must abide by WHS laws and provide Covid-safe workplaces. Best-practice protocols include:

- Doing a risk assessment of the workplace
- Carefully planning and designing work systems and physical environments to avoid risks and hazards
- Speaking with team members about WHS risks and any significant changes in the workplace
- Ensuring there is a good emergency plan in place
- Providing communication, assistance, resources and support to employees who may be impacted by work-related hazards or incidents, and ensuring resources are provided in different languages as required

All states and territories require or encourage workplaces to have some form of Covid-safe plan. Even if a private practice has previously conducted a risk assessment, it should revise and implement updated control measures each time Covid restrictions ease. For example, it should ensure policies, procedures and systems address the following concerns:

The Covid-19 pandemic has amped up the need for organisational agility, with employers and workers continuously adapting to new developments in Australia's evolving Covid-safe work culture

Who is responsible for preventing, responding to, and reporting a Covid-19 outbreak in the practice?

- What infection control measures will be implemented?
- How can social distancing be maintained?
- What forms of contact tracing are being implemented?
- What approach to mandating and monitoring Covid-19 staff vaccination will be taken?
- What privacy, record-keeping and anti-discrimination measures will be implemented?
- Are there sufficient leave entitlements and workplace adjustments for staff?
- Is there sufficient communication and training for staff?
- Is there sufficient mental health support for staff, like an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)?

Mandatory Covid-19 vaccinations

State and territory governments have made, and may continue to make, public health orders requiring certain workers to be vaccinated against Covid-19. In many cases, these orders apply to the allied health profession, and private practice owners and their staff must comply with them.

Preparing to bring workers back on site? Please contact WorkPlacePLUS to receive your complimentary *Returning to the Workplace* checklist

Public health orders aside, an increasing number of Australian workplaces across a range of sectors are now choosing to implement mandatory Covid-19 vaccination as a new condition of employment or on-site attendance. The Fair Work Ombudsman advises it is reasonable for healthcare employers to mandate Covid-19 vaccinations for client-facing or on-site workers, as they will have close contact with people particularly vulnerable to the health impacts of Covid-19. This applies to the allied health sector.

While some employees may be concerned about mandatory vaccinations, allied health practitioners who are employees must comply with any applicable public health orders, and any lawful and reasonable directions from employers.

Private practice owners should provide staff with reliable, facts-based information and practical support on Covid-19 vaccination. They should also provide ample opportunity for staff to discuss any concerns. If private practice owners take steps to lawfully mandate Covid-19 vaccination in the workplace, or if a public health order requires it, then any employee who refuses to get vaccinated will find their employment options limited.

In general, it is best practice for private practice owners to take a compassionate approach to resolving any employee concerns. Always listen carefully to any staff concerns, and talk things through.

In some instances, you may need to offer extra support services such as an EAP.

It is always important for private practice owners to understand employer rights and obligations. If you have any questions, or require more detailed or tailored information, it is advisable to seek professional advice, whether through the WHS authority in your jurisdiction, the Fair Work Ombudsman or a human resources consultancy that works closely with the allied health sector, such as *WorkPlacePLUS*.

All OTA members receive special OTA member benefits through WorkPlacePLUS for support with human resources or industrial-related issues. For more information, contact Anna Pannuzzo on (03) 9492 0958 or visit www.WorkPlacePLUS.com.au.