

Black dog gnaws at profession

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DEPRESSION affects almost a third of solicitors and one in five barristers, new research released last night reveals.

Depression is also rife among law students, with more than 40 per cent of students experiencing distress severe enough to warrant medical assessment.

The alarming figures have prompted calls for law school deans, managing partners, barristers and judges to band together to tackle the problem head on.

Professor Ian Hickie from Sydney University's Brain and Mind Institute, which conducted the research, said a systematic approach to the problem was needed by leaders of the profession.

The study of 2400 lawyers was presented last night at the Tristan Jepson Memorial Lecture, an annual event addressing the problem.

It is named after a former University of NSW law student and lawyer who committed suicide in 2004 after battling depression for years. He was 26.

Professor Hickie said that better education was needed about mental health issues, as well as stronger mentoring and support, especially at law schools and during the transition from study to full-time work.

"The experience of being at university should be a whole lot better than it is and it should support early health-care," Professor Hickie said.

He also said attributes common to lawyers, such as perfectionism, anxiety and obsessionism, put lawyers at a high risk of depression. While those personal attributes were difficult to change, he said other aspects of the profession, like its competitive and individualistic nature, could be changed in favour of a more collegiate approach.

John Atkin, managing partner of Blake Dawson, which sponsored last night's memorial lecture, said the firm was working to foster a deeper sense of purpose among its lawyers, in order to tackle mental health problems.

He said pro bono programs helped take the focus away from billable units and financial targets. The firm has also employed a psychologist and is participating in a University of Sydney research project to help people build skills at perspective-taking, and dissociating work from life.

Mr Atkin said pessimists tended to flourish in the legal profession because pessimism was associated with prudence. "That means we are often by natural leaning, and certainly by the cultural environment and even the training in university, we're trained to see the worst in things," he said.

Mr Atkin said the firm was already working with other law firms and was keen to collaborate with universities and other parts of the profession to deal with the issue. Professor Hickie's find-



Hickie

ings support earlier studies that have shown lawyers experience depression at four times the rate of the rest of the population.

Lawyers consistently rank higher than other professionals in studies on depression, with

one study finding 11 per cent of lawyers contemplate suicide each month.

Alcoholism and drug use are also high among members of the profession.

Professor Hickie said the legal profession needed to work on improving its image, which was contributing to sending some lawyers into a "self-critical spiral. Individual low self-esteem and individual self-criticism are reinforced by experiences around you".

The University of NSW's Professor Prue Vines has been working to tackle depression and anxiety through the introduction of a formal peer mentoring system for students. The university teaches first-year students about the pressures of the legal profession.

Professor Vines, the law school's director of first-year studies, said she trained peer mentors not to act as counsellors but to normalise the idea of getting help.

"Because law students are clever ... they think they can solve these issues on their own and they don't ask for help," she said. But if they sought help earlier, some of the issues could be more easily dealt with.

She said early anecdotal evidence suggested students who had taken part in the program were becoming more comfortable about seeking help for their problems.

Professor Vines urged the profession to get behind law schools' efforts and to ensure that when students entered the profession they were not "eaten up and spat out".

"It's very important that the profession and the law schools work together," she said. "There have been some people within the profession who have been of the view that it's a good way to weed people out — but we know this is not about being weaker than other people."

Professor Vines said separate UNSW research had shown law students' attitudes put them at greater risk than other students, including placing an extremely high emphasis on marks, and studying law to please others, which gave them less of a feeling of control over their own life.

She said tackling these issues was seen as part of the "academic enterprise".

"We want to see that our students reach their optimum academic potential that isn't interfered with by horrible experiences in life," she said.