

Guest Editorial

# Samaritans: the fourth emergency service

## An anaesthetist and Samaritan, Liverpool

The recent death of a friend who was also an anaesthetist in training prompted me to write this article to raise awareness of how Samaritans, a charity for which I volunteer, may be able to help if you're having a difficult time.

We've known for a long time that anaesthetists are particularly vulnerable to suicide, and the possible reasons for this have been explored on numerous occasions, including a 2019 guideline published by the Association of Anaesthetists. Both within our field and in the wider community there has been a lot of interest in recent years in supporting mental health. Despite this, suicide rates appear to be increasing. Working conditions are increasingly being scrutinised for potential stressors with an emphasis on morale and welfare, and numerous positive interventions such as mindfulness, exercise, yoga and drop-in counselling sessions have been enthusiastically advocated by many. This is all valuable work, and I'm delighted with the progress that has been made during the last few years.

However, sometimes people find themselves in the depths of despair, and in these emergency situations the Samaritans may be the only place left to turn.

Samaritans started in 1953 as a helpline for those contemplating suicide. The name was coined by a national newspaper, but Samaritans is not a religious organisation. Since then the organisation has grown significantly and now has 201 branches across the

UK and Republic of Ireland, and there's an international network of similar organisations around the world.

I started volunteering for Samaritans in 2010 while at medical school, and since then I have volunteered at four different branches across the world. Despite the Samaritans being a well-known charity, with prominent adverts at railway stations and on television, I've found that awareness within the NHS is sometimes quite limited. Many of us may know of Samaritans as a resource to which we can direct our patients, perhaps most commonly during placements in A&E or general practice. I want to emphasise that the service exists for all of us as well.

Samaritans provide a listening service by telephone and email, and we're available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Volunteers go through rigorous training and come from all walks of life. There's no pressure and no judgement, and you can tell us as little or as much about yourself as you wish. A recent study showed that around 70 per cent of callers feel better after calling Samaritans. Although not everyone who calls us is suicidal, the support that we provide to people in distress and despair is with a vision that fewer people die by suicide.

There are lots of sources of support out there, and the ongoing pandemic has brought wellbeing into sharp focus. This needs to continue even when the pandemic is a distant memory. Some people may be comfortable seeking help through their place of work or training deanery, but others may not. Our careers present a myriad of pressures and challenges to our mental health, but this isn't just about professional burnout – we can have problems in our personal lives too. Sometimes talking to a friend or trusted colleague can help, but sometimes people would prefer a complete stranger to whom they can talk anonymously and confidentially. Whatever your situation, Samaritans is available all day and every day.

Samaritans can be contacted at any time on 116 123 or by emailing [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org), and more information can be found at: [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

Similar organisations outside the UK/ Republic of Ireland can be found by visiting [befrienders.org](http://befrienders.org)



### References

- 1 New guidelines to help anaesthetists at risk of suicide. *Association of Anaesthetists*, 2019 ([bit.ly/3hjBp72](https://bit.ly/3hjBp72)).
- 2 Yentis SM et al. Suicide amongst anaesthetists – an Association of Anaesthetists survey. *Anaesth* 2019;**74**:2365–2373 ([bit.ly/3dyEj6P](https://bit.ly/3dyEj6P)).
- 3 Caring for doctors, caring for patients. *GMC*, 2019 ([bit.ly/3dBdVt8](https://bit.ly/3dBdVt8)).
- 4 Markham T, Forshaw A, Sutcliffe R. Samaritans Caller Outcome Study. Birmingham 2020: *MEL Research Ltd* ([bit.ly/2UT88sd](https://bit.ly/2UT88sd)).

## SAMARITANS



Founded in 1953 by Chad Varah



201 branches in the UK and Republic of Ireland



More than 16,200 trained listening volunteers



Available 24/7

Call on 116 123  
[jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) | [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)