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‘Drowning in the deep end’: factors which alleviate or exacerbate experiences of vicarious trauma in New Zealand Crown prosecutors

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This study qualitatively examines factors which *exacerbate* and *alleviate* experiences of vicarious trauma (VT) in New Zealand Crown prosecutors. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 New Zealand Crown prosecutors. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Participants perceived *personal and work-based protective factors* (e.g. safe and supportive work environment, the rewarding nature of the role, engaging in self-care) alleviated experiences of VT, while *occupational stressors* (e.g. pressures of the role, workplace culture, perception of injustice) and a *lack of education, training, and support* exacerbated VT. Findings suggest a lack of acceptance or acknowledgment of the emotional and occupational demands of engaging with potentially traumatic material (PTM) in the legal profession creates a barrier to effective management of VT symptoms and individual wellbeing. The need for improved education surrounding the practical realities of working as a criminal lawyer and greater availability of formalised support from peers and professionals is discussed.

Keywords: Secondary traumatic stress; vicarious trauma; lawyer; attorney; PTSD; protective factors; occupational stress.

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1. Introduction

Criminal justice system (CJS) workers frequently interact with individuals who have experienced or caused significant harm. Consequently, they are regularly exposed to potentially traumatic material (PTM) including written, oral, photographic, and audio-visual material depicting the traumatic experiences of others (Birze et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2023). The impacts of trauma exposure on mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing are well established. Both direct and indirect exposure to trauma can lead to multiple adverse

outcomes such as intrusive thoughts, alterations in cognition and mood, and problems with arousal and reactivity which are characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; American Psychiatric Association, 1980).

Vicarious trauma (VT) is a term often used to describe experiences of psychological and emotional distress that develop from the occupational exposure to the trauma of others (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). VT involves an accumulation of difficulties similar to PTSD. Symptoms can be *physical* (e.g. headaches, chronic fatigue, gastrointestinal disturbances;

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Hayes, 2013), *neurobiological* (e.g. higher cortical impairment; Tyler, 2012), *emotional* (e.g. sadness, anger, frustration; Cohen & Collens, 2013), *cognitive* (e.g. cognitive distortions; Aparicio et al., 2013) and *relational* (e.g. problems with intimacy; Branson et al., 2014).

While trauma exposure is a customary part of working in the CJS, this has been found to have a negative impact on wellbeing, including the development of VT, across a range of frontline and back office professionals including corrections officers, police, digital forensic analysts, investigators, and legal professionals (Birze et al., 2023; Duran & Woodhams, 2022; Ellison & Jaegers, 2022; Leclerc et al., 2020). Criminal lawyers are one group of justice professionals who are frequently exposed to and undertake detailed analyses of potentially traumatic materials (PTM) depicting serious interpersonal harm such as physical assault, rape, sexual abuse, and murder (Vrklevski & Franklin, 2008). They also regularly interact with traumatised individuals (such as those who have been victimised or have perpetrated violence) and engage with the historic trauma of those who are engaged in the justice process (Chaudhri et al., 2019; Ellison & Munro, 2017; Kim et al., 2023; Levin et al., 2011). This heightened exposure to graphic PTM and traumatised clients has been cited as a factor which may increase criminal lawyers' vulnerability to experiencing VT (Iversen & Robertson, 2021; Kim et al., 2023; Levin & Greisberg, 2003; Maguire & Byrne, 2017; Soon et al., 2024; Weir et al., 2021).

Several studies have suggested that criminal lawyers experience elevated levels of stress, burnout and VT compared to both lawyers working in other subdisciplines and mental health professionals (Hasnain et al., 2010; Iversen & Robertson, 2021; Levin & Greisberg, 2003; Maguire & Byrne, 2017; Vrklevski & Franklin, 2008). The specific risks associated with working in criminal law and the need for employers to act have been further exemplified in the recent case of

Kozarov v State of Victoria [2022] HCA 12. In this case, it was found that an ex-solicitor working with a large volume of material relating to sexual offences (involving child sexual exploitation and abuse) had sustained significant psychiatric injuries (chronic PTSD) over the course of her employment, and that her employer (the Office of Public Prosecutions) owed a duty of care to proactively reduce the risk of obvious and inherent psychiatric injury.

Despite this identified need, lawyers have largely been excluded from VT research until recently (James, 2020), with two recent reviews identifying fewer than a dozen empirical papers focused on this group (Iversen & Robertson, 2021; Léonard et al., 2020). The lack of research attention may reflect a false assumption that criminal lawyers can navigate the trauma-laden CJS as emotionally detached actors, able to exert purely rational and unhindered judgement (Gunby & Carline, 2019; Daicoff, 2004; Roach Anleu & Mack, 2021; Vrklevski & Franklin, 2008). However, as noted above, criminal lawyers may in fact be at an *increased* risk of VT and the associated costs to wellbeing. While there is an implicit acceptance in legal circles that trauma is at the core of the CJS, acknowledgment of the impact of working with PTM and the implementation of appropriate support strategies by employers and the legal profession is still in its infancy (James, 2020; Pike & Rebar, 2024). Criminal lawyers are often not trained to manage the emotional demands of trauma work, let alone the traumatic impact this can have (Ellison & Munro, 2017; Gomme & Hall, 1995).

There is growing research and professional interest in the issue of lawyer wellbeing in legal scholarly outlets including the need to respond to identified concerns. This has coincided with an emerging body of research examining the types of PTM that are experienced as traumatic, the effects of PTM exposure, and the individual and occupational factors associated with poor wellbeing in lawyers. Through this work, several factors have

been identified that contribute to poor lawyer wellbeing, including: frequency and time spent working on trauma related cases, long hours, caseload volume, mental health stigma, the futility of working in a system with low success rates, and a lack of mental health training and support (Graffin, 2019; Holt et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2023; Leonard et al., 2023; Levin et al., 2011; Popa et al., 2024; Weir et al., 2021). However, findings from these studies show some variability (Iversen & Robertson, 2021). Relatively little empirical research has been conducted with criminal lawyers specifically, with most of these studies focusing on other subdisciplines such as those working on asylum applications, personal injury, and family law (e.g. Graffin, 2019; Piwowarczyk et al., 2009; Popa et al., 2024; Rønning et al., 2020). Furthermore, the focus of most research has been to quantitatively identify the prevalence and symptoms of VT (e.g. Gillander, 2018; Maguire & Byrne, 2017; Vrkleviski & Franklin, 2008) as opposed to examining contextual, interpersonal, and organisational factors which *exacerbate* and *alleviate* experiences of VT. This narrow research focus reflects the historical neglect of workplace and contextual factors in the wider literature on lawyer wellbeing (Collier, 2025; Jones et al., 2021; Soon et al., 2024), and a general lack of attention to strengths and protective factors in the wider secondary trauma literature (Whittenbury et al., 2024). Consequently, it is unclear what aspects of working in the CJS are perceived to exacerbate VT, and what contextual, interpersonal, and organisational factors are perceived to protect against the negative impacts of PTM exposure. Understanding the factors which exacerbate and alleviate experiences of VT is critical for improving professional and organisational practices, promoting individual strengths that may buffer against VT, and developing evidence-based approaches for supporting criminal lawyers working with PTM.

To address this gap in the literature, the current study sought to qualitatively examine

the contextual, interpersonal, and organisational factors perceived to alleviate or exacerbate criminal lawyers' experiences of VT in a sample of New Zealand Crown prosecutors. In New Zealand, although some criminal lawyers may both prosecute and defend in their careers, they tend to work exclusively for prosecution or defence at any given time. Crown prosecutors in New Zealand are appointed to conduct prosecutions for the most serious cases on behalf of the state, and work within private law firms headed by a Crown Solicitor who holds the warrant to conduct prosecutions within a particular geographic region. Because Crown prosecutors work exclusively with the most serious offence types (e.g. manslaughter, murder, infanticide, sexual offences against children and all jury trials), they are likely to be more frequently exposed to greater levels of PTM than other criminal practitioners. Previous research has highlighted that New Zealand Crown prosecutors are routinely exposed to PTM in their role through working directly with victims of crime, reading victim impact statements, reviewing file material including descriptions of child sexual exploitation and abuse material, photographs documenting extreme injury and fatality, and emergency call recordings, and experience symptoms of VT as a result of this exposure (Kim et al., 2023). By developing a deeper understanding of the factors Crown prosecutors perceive to alleviate or exacerbate their occupational experiences of VT, we can identify ways to better support criminal lawyers' wellbeing and develop strategies to mitigate the effects of occupational exposure to PTM.

2. Method

2.1. Design

A phenomenologically-oriented qualitative design informed by a critical realist epistemology was adopted for the current study. In the context of our research question, this means the study was designed to explore the lived experiences of Crown prosecutors who work

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Demographic	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Female	12	63.2
	Male	7	36.8
Ethnicity	Pākehā/New Zealand European	16	84.2
	Māori ^a	2	10.5
	Asian	1	5.3
Classification ^b	Junior	9	47.4
	Intermediate	4	21.1
	Senior	6	31.6
Provincial/Urban	Provincial	12	63.2
	Urban	7	36.8

Note: Percentages have been rounded to one decimal point.

^aMāori are the indigenous people of New Zealand.

^bThe full classification criterion for a junior, intermediate, senior and principal prosecutor can be found in the Crown Solicitors Terms of Office (2021). Due to small numbers of principal prosecutors, any principal prosecutors who participated in the research are included in the 'senior' category to protect their identity.

with PTM and the factors they perceived to exacerbate and alleviate experiences of VT, as well as the meaning they attributed to these experiences and how these are shaped by the lived reality of their role in the New Zealand CJS. Analysis was conducted using an inductive (data driven) and semantic approach to give voice to participants' self-reported experiences using their own words, as opposed to interpreting these through a particular theoretical paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.2. Participants

Participants were 19 practicing Crown prosecutors. Each region in New Zealand has a Crown Solicitor, who holds a warrant to conduct Crown prosecutions. There are currently 17 (private) Crown Solicitor firms operating in New Zealand that, as of March 2020, cumulatively employ 188 full-time equivalent Crown prosecutors (Crown Law, 2020). Five Crown Solicitor firms were contacted to seek permission to share study information about the research with staff, including two 'urban' (i.e. firms in large cities with large numbers of staff) and three 'provincial' (i.e. firms in smaller cities that service a surrounding rural area) firms (as defined by Britton, 2018).

Positive responses were received from four firms.

Participants' demographics are summarised in Table 1. Of the 19 participants, 12 identified as female and seven as male. Most participants (84.2%) identified as Pākehā (New Zealand European), and their ages ranged from 25 to 55 years ($M = 35.11$, $SD = 9.93$). Length of service as a Crown prosecutor ranged from four months to 27 years ($M = 7.5$ years). Just under half of participants reported holding a 'junior' position (47.4%, $n = 9$) within the firm where they worked.

2.3. Procedure and materials

This study was conducted as part of a wider project on criminal lawyers' experiences of working with emotion and PTM in the New Zealand CJS. Ethical approval was provided by the Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee (Reference: 28052). Crown Solicitors' firms were contacted via email, and those who expressed interest were sent a further email invitation and information sheet to provide to staff. Staff at consenting firms were then sent an email invitation inviting them to participate

in a research study examining Crown prosecutors' experiences of working with emotion and PTM. To preserve anonymity and confidentiality of participants, individuals who were interested in participating in the research directly contacted the research team to arrange a time and date for an interview. Participants were informed of the nature and limits of confidentiality, and written consent was obtained prior to commencing interviews.

Interviews were conducted by the first author between April and October 2020. Although interviews were originally planned to be conducted face-to-face or via telephone, this was adjusted to online (Zoom) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to guide the interview process. The use of a semi-structured interview allowed for flexibility in discussion based on participants' experiences and for spontaneous information to arise and be responded to over the course of the interview. The interview schedule comprised five sections: (1) demographic and background information, (2) participants' role as a prosecutor, (3) working with potentially traumatic material, (4) managing emotion in the workplace, and (5) workplace support and wellbeing. Interviews ranged from 42 minutes to 2.5 hours in length ($M = 57$ minutes). Given the sensitive nature of the interviews, participants were given the option to cease their participation or withdraw from the study if they reported or were observed to be visibly upset, and details of free support services/helplines were provided verbally. Participants were also provided with the opportunity to withdraw from the research up to eight weeks following the interview.

Interviews were recorded using the inbuilt recording function in Zoom and transcribed verbatim by the first author. Participants were allocated a gender-neutral pseudonym and potentially identifying information (places, names, specific experiences) were redacted from the transcripts. Participants were provided with the opportunity to review their

interview transcript and highlight any information they wished to be redacted or removed from the research.

In the interests of researcher wellbeing, debriefing and supervision with a senior member of the research team was available following every interview. Additional supervision sessions were provided throughout transcription and analysis where prolonged immersion with the data was required to provide a safe space to reflect on any issues or points of distress as well as key observations and interpretation of the data. Appropriate university support services were also available throughout the project.

2.4. Data analysis

Interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; 2006, 2013). An inductive and semantic approach to analysis was used, meaning that themes were developed from the data to reflect the explicit content of participants' experiences. The six steps of RTA were completed as follows, noting that these are cyclical in nature with the researcher moving back and forth between stages with refinements made throughout: (i) *data familiarisation* (reading and re-reading of interview transcripts and noting initial thoughts and observations), (ii) *generating initial codes* (tagging segments of text relevant to the research question with summary descriptions using the comment function in Microsoft Word), (iii) *searching for themes* (physically arranging codes into provisional groupings based on shared meaning), (iv) *reviewing themes* (appraising the cohesiveness and coherence of themes against data extracts and each other to ensure alignment with and independence of ideas, developing a thematic map to examine relationships between themes and subthemes), (v) *defining and naming themes*, (vi) *producing the report*.

The first author engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the research to reflect on initial thoughts and interpretations of the data and their role within the research process.

Table 2. Themes and subthemes of factors that alleviate or exacerbate experiences of VT.

Theme	Subtheme
<i>Alleviators</i>	
1. Personal and work-based protective factors	1.1. Safe and supportive work environment 1.2. Rewarding nature of the role 1.3. Engaging in self-care
<i>Exacerbators</i>	
2. Occupational stressors	2.1. Pressures of the role 2.2. Workplace culture 2.3. Perception of injustice
3. Lack of education, training, and support	3.1. Nothing can prepare you 3.2. Drowning in the deep end

Team meetings were used to reflect on how the characteristics and previous experiences of investigators may have influenced interpretation of the data, triangulate thinking, consider alternative perspectives, and ensure participants’ voices were being centred. Further refinements to the analysis were made in line with these reflections.

2.5. Reflexivity

The research team all have academic backgrounds in law and/or psychology and experiences of working in the CJS in the United Kingdom and/or New Zealand. Our own experiences of working both in the CJS and with PTM in these roles, were both a strength and a point of reflection for analysis and interpretation of the data. For example, we were able to empathise with some of the participants’ experiences and held knowledge and understanding of the contexts within which these experiences occurred, supporting the development of rapport and trust during the interviews and interpretation of the data. However, we also had to exercise care during analysis to not overlook or overemphasise experiences of participants that either aligned or contrasted with our own experiences, taking care to analyse data over multiple sessions to enable reflection and consider the alignment of themes and subthemes with the data.

3. Results

Three themes were developed from the data, one describing factors perceived to alleviate VT, and two describing factors which were considered to exacerbate VT. Themes and their corresponding subthemes are summarised in Table 2.

3.1. Personal and work-based protective factors

Elements of the personal and professional lives of Crown prosecutors were considered to buffer against impacts of exposure to PTM and symptoms of VT. More specifically, the presence of a *safe and supportive work environment*, the *rewarding nature of the role*, and *engaging in self-care* were identified as important for mitigating against the impacts of PTM exposure and promoting resilience. However, there were often challenges to creating and maintaining these protective factors which meant these were not always accessible to participants, increasing vulnerability.

3.1.1. Safe and supportive work environment

Most Crown prosecutors identified the value of having a work culture that involved open, free-flowing communication with colleagues. Being able to talk to others who had a mutual understanding of the challenges around

working with PTM was viewed as creating a bond between colleagues, invoked a sense of camaraderie and led to colleagues being described as the ‘number one source of support’:

I think talking about anything is good for you and helpful. But particularly so when it's people who can empathise because they're doing the same thing and they've experienced the same things as you. They may have good advice or at least be able to completely understand what it is you've just experienced. – Quinn

When discussing support and camaraderie, participants tended to draw a clear line between colleagues and those who were partners in the firm as appropriate confidantes. This appeared to be fuelled by a professional expectation of perfectionism and resilience, and a workplace culture where showing vulnerability was perceived as a weakness:

I feel like I can ring any of my colleagues really and ask them a question and they would help me. I think there's a real disconnect between the partnership and the rest of the firm though. That's pretty hard. – Jessie

Disconnect between partners and peers was not inevitable: one prosecutor spoke of an open work culture that was inclusive of partners. These partners had created a work environment that facilitated open discussion regarding personal trauma and experiences of difficulties faced in the role. In turn, this engendered a sense of relatability and feeling understood:

I'll tell [a partner] for example and he tells me about things he found really tough and that helps a lot. It makes me feel ... like I'm not on my own feeling like this stuff is hard. And you know, especially when he tells me he's cried over things before ... that's really important for me to hear. – Danny

The ability to share experiences created a safe space for Crown prosecutors to discuss

their own feelings and vulnerabilities in the role, particularly in their work with PTM. As described by Danny above, shared experiences were described as validating, and reinforced prosecutors were not alone in experiencing negative consequences related to PTM:

But being able to have [my reaction] validated and realise that ... I'm not too weak for my job? Yeah, that was really validating. – Alex

Participants described ‘gallows’ or ‘black’ humour (humorous comments or jokes about unpleasant or worrying topics) as a common strategy for both facilitating difficult discussions between colleagues while also lightening the tone of the workplace. This type of humour was reported as being strictly limited to the workplace and among colleagues. Crown prosecutors identified that in any other setting such humour would be viewed as highly inappropriate:

... you develop coping mechanisms that by in large, are you know, positive or at least not harmful, like the dark sense of humour which you can only ever share with your co-workers ... – Charlie

Speaking with colleagues also mitigated any risk of confidentiality breaches as colleagues were privy to the same confidential files and subject to the same ethical and professional standards. This was another contributing factor to participants' reliance on their work colleagues as a support system:

... I don't really discuss it with anyone, because of confidentiality stuff or whatever but it's enough for me to discuss it with people at work ... just the fact that we can talk openly and be a hundred percent transparent about what we're talking about in the office, that's helpful. – Danny.

Although colleagues provided a source of support, Crown prosecutors also described feeling frustrated that their loved ones were

unable to fully comprehend the stressors they faced in the role, owing to confidentiality standards barring them from sharing details of their work. However, they also felt a desire to protect their loved ones from exposure to the full extent of human cruelty and trauma, which fed back into their reliance on colleagues as their only means of support:

I do sometimes discuss it in general terms with my friends and family as well, but you have to stop after a while because they don't understand and also, I don't want them to understand because the only way they could was if they too were exposed to that stuff. So, you have to talk to your colleagues about it and accept that your friends and family can't help you ... – Mackenzie

The maintenance of a safe and supportive work environment was identified to be equally important as the creation of such an environment. However, Crown prosecutors discussed that support networks established with their colleagues were delicate and susceptible to disruption due to staff turnover. When close colleagues left the firm, Crown prosecutors discussed not only losing a friend but also their support network:

I've had some people that I rely on a lot ... close friends that I work with and they're really supportive. A lot of them have left recently though. That's pretty tough. – Jessie

This illustrates that while a close support system formed between colleagues is essential for alleviating the negative impacts of exposure to PTM, it is somewhat precarious which can create issues for sustaining management of VT.

3.1.2. Rewarding nature of the job

Crown prosecutors described their roles as 'fulfilling' and 'rewarding' in that it presented them with a novel opportunity to assist vulnerable populations through an invariably

distressing criminal justice process. The meaningful and rewarding nature of the role of a Crown prosecutor was described as a motivating factor for both why participants entered and continued to work in the profession, and provided a high sense of job satisfaction:

I also really enjoy being the person who is there for someone in their darkest moments. I think that's probably ultimately the most rewarding part of the job is meeting someone who's gone through the worst thing they're probably going to go through in their lives and you are able to be their ... voice in the system. Although you're not their lawyer, you do feel like you're there for them in that moment. I find that really rewarding. – Bailey

The experience of engaging with the meaningful aspects of the criminal justice process also appeared to mitigate some of the negative impacts of the role. Despite sometimes feeling overwhelmed by the challenges of the role, prosecutors were unwavering in their conviction to stay and fight for justice:

It certainly provides a challenge in a way that's satisfying and stimulating. That's one of the plus sides of some of the negatives ... but I think mostly it feels like a battle that I choose to stay engaged in because I think it's a worthy project because of the justice and the humanness of it. – Alex

These factors support the notion that legal professionals can be considered 'helping professionals', with Crown prosecutors describing the 'humanness' of the work they carry out. Notably, the human component of the role was simultaneously described as the most difficult and most rewarding aspect of a Crown prosecutor's role.

3.1.3. Engaging in self-care

Crown prosecutors reported using various self-care strategies inside and outside of the office to mitigate the negative impacts of working

with PTM. In the office, Crown prosecutors described avoiding interaction with traumatic material until absolutely necessary for legal analysis:

On files that I know contain this stuff, I'll avoid looking at it unless it's absolutely necessary. – Morgan

Participants described viewing material through an analytical lens and trying to see offending as a series of facts to create distance between difficult material and the emotions which arise when engaging with it. This 'detachment' was developed and refined with experience, but participants admitted it was not infallible:

I guess you have to be a little detached and clinical and analytical around it ... try to sort of not get drawn into an emotional response ... I think over time you get better at doing that, being able to view it as you know, less personal and really just part of a series of facts or factors that you take into account when preparing for a file. That of course isn't always achieved ((laughs)). – Quinn

Seeking professional support was identified as a form of self-care at work, although participants provided conflicting accounts as to whether they felt professional support was beneficial. Those who had sought professional help felt the efficacy of sessions was limited when the service provider lacked an understanding of the nature and unique stressors of the role:

What the lady said was 'you should find a spot on the train journey home and when you pass that spot on the train, you need to stop thinking about work and you don't let yourself think about it again until you go back past that spot on the train on the way back to work' ((laughs)) ... And I thought, she clearly has zero understanding of my job – Alex

On the other hand, some prosecutors reported more positive experiences with

professional support as it created a space to unpack the complex entanglement of working with PTM. Professional support was perceived as particularly helpful when participants felt they did not have existing strategies in place to cope with the impact on their emotional and mental wellbeing while working with PTM, providing a beneficial avenue to acquire an effective toolkit of coping strategies:

There was one particular case which for whatever reason it was kind of a perfect storm, just kind of really affected me. And I was thinking about it kind of a lot after work, it really bothered me, nothing physical – I didn't have a breakdown or I wasn't depressed or anything like that. It just stayed with me a lot. And then I just felt like it was something I just needed to unpack with someone professional, so I just wanted to get things sorted in my own mind ... I felt it really helped. – Bailey

Self-care was also reflected in the personal lives of Crown prosecutors. Participants stressed the importance of keeping to their normal life routines such as exercise, yoga, and generally maintaining a healthy lifestyle. This allowed prosecutors to isolate their professional and personal lives:

I've never drunk excessively but I've sort of tried to do a combination of trying to leave it in this office, make sure I have a pretty healthy out of work life with people who love me and fresh air and healthy living. – Bailey

Wellbeing was also viewed holistically, with an inability to engage in self-care having flow-on effects into their professional life, highlighting the importance of engaging in self-care both inside and outside of the office:

I find if I am getting enough sleep and I'm exercising, then my mental health is like ... I'm not vulnerable to I think getting upset. I'm not as vulnerable to being affected by the material but [if] those resources are depleted then ... I think I can be more susceptible to getting kind of upset about things. – Jessie

Crown prosecutors reported using self-care as a form of coping to combat the negative impacts of their work with PTM. Participants reported awareness in the importance of self-care to ensure their personal and professional wellbeing, although the effectiveness of some types of self-care (i.e. professional support) was variable between participants.

3.2. Occupational stressors

This theme describes occupational stressors faced by Crown prosecutors that were considered to exacerbate experiences of VT. These stressors fell into three categories: *the pressures of the role*, *workplace culture*, and *the perception of injustice* experienced by Crown prosecutors throughout their work. More specifically, these occupational stressors were described as either eroding general wellbeing or inhibiting help-seeking, leaving prosecutors more vulnerable to experiencing symptoms associated with VT.

3.2.1. Pressures of the role

The *pressures of the role* were described by participants as stemming from the interaction of two factors: the demanding nature of the role and the expectations of perfection placed upon Crown prosecutors. Participants described the evolving nature of their role over the years through the introduction of legislation and legislative reform which they suggested led to their roles becoming more demanding over time:

Well I don't know if the role itself has changed, other than there's far more work and there is more pressure in terms of having to file more documents at different stages of the proceedings and yeah that's probably the biggest thing that's changed ... we've now moved to a process that's far more regimented. – Madison

In addition, Crown prosecutors reported feeling tremendous pressure from various individuals involved in the criminal justice process

to be 'perfect', with little tolerance for error in the role:

You get it from your firm, your partners. Your senior partners definitely expect you to never make any mistakes. The same with judges. You can never make a mistake, it's not forgiven ... And you also get it from the Police who have spent often years on an investigation, and they're really invested in it and they do not, they can't have you making any mistakes. And also victims and their families. Anything you do to mess up their chances of getting justice is yeah really, you can't do that to them. – Mackenzie

Participants viewed this standard of perfection as an unattainable ideal. Role-specific stressors, particularly having a high workload and managing multiple files with tight turn-arounds for deadlines, meant that prosecutors reported continuously feeling like they were working to a sub-par standard:

The relentless nature of it ((laughs)) in that there seems to be too much work, so constantly having the feeling that I'm not doing things to the best standard because I don't have enough time. – Jamie

In some instances, inadequate staffing resulted in higher workload allocation and increased overtime hours for existing employees. Working long weekdays and frequently working on weekends encroached on personal time to relax and engage in self-care, leaving participants feeling exhausted:

... [Y]ou might get to a Sunday evening where you haven't had much of a weekend and you've got to start back and keeping going on a long trial and you're not feeling very recharged ((laughs)). – Morgan

The cumulative effect of these factors was that participants felt unable to meet expectations placed on them by others (e.g. partners, judges, police officers, complainants) which led to feelings of inadequacy. These

expectations placed considerable pressure on them to ‘get it right’ each time, while those same pressures impaired their ability to do so. Additionally, the time constraints resulting from workload, staffing levels, and increasing demands placed on Crown prosecutors afforded them less time to process or address stressors resulting from engagement with PTM, and less time to engage in self-care behaviours to alleviate potential VT.

3.2.2. Workplace culture

While a positive workplace culture was previously identified as something which could alleviate VT, some aspects of workplace culture hindered prosecutors’ help-seeking behaviour and therefore exacerbated the effects of working with PTM. Participants described a prevalent ‘suck it up’ attitude from senior staff that silenced people from voicing their concerns, which meant that Crown prosecutors were less likely to disclose or address VT due to fear:

I think they ... probably think, what are these people complaining about? I’ve had to deal with this for twenty, thirty years. It’s nothing ... I’ve gone to ... an autopsy, I’ve seen this, I’ve seen that. These people need to harden up ... Whilst the legal profession [is] trying to change there’s definitely the old guard who think like that and are quite traditional in their view, and it’s just like, suck it up. If you can’t handle it, you can’t handle it. You shouldn’t be a prosecutor. – Jessie

Participants perceived that over time partners had become ‘immune’ to the reaches of PTM and VT, and therefore did not need or want to seek help. This further stigmatised help-seeking behaviour and the perception that help-seeking reflected a lack of professional competence. In addition to this, the fear of being perceived as incompetent was informed, in part, by anxiety regarding career advancement. As partners oversaw file allocation to staff members, prosecutors reported feeling

that admitting to being affected by PTM would be ‘career suicide’:

There is very much an expectation that you’ll just get on with it and you can’t be weak or fallible really ... I don’t think that you would advance professionally in the firm if you were to admit to being damaged. I mean it’s okay to joke about it but not to seriously admit to the effect the material has on you. – Mackenzie

Crown prosecutors described a workplace culture which, intentionally or otherwise, resulted in the stigmatisation of help-seeking behaviour. This was informed by a fear of being labelled as incompetent or ‘too weak’ for the role, and an associated anxiety that their careers would stagnate if they were perceived to be struggling. This led to apprehension about addressing negative VT symptoms which subsequently became normalised, ignored, and exacerbated.

3.2.3. Perception of injustice

Many participants expressed the view that the CJS is imperfect and broken and detrimentally affects individuals, causing ‘a lot of anger and stress and sadness’. Deep-rooted flaws in the justice system, such as the over-representation of Māori and poor treatment of vulnerable populations such as the homeless, led to a sense of helplessness among participants, some of whom felt they were a ‘cog in the wheel’ of a system resistant to change. This could lead participants to question the worth and integrity of the CJS:

... at times I sometimes feel like I’m just part of this bigger system that I don’t sometimes perceive to be working very well and doesn’t feel meaningful when I think of it like that ((laughs)). – Kerry

These feelings were underlined by a sense of having limited scope in their professional capacities to enact meaningful change for defendants, who are also often victims of abuse and intergenerational criminality:

And in terms of the defendants themselves, unfortunately a lot of them are in the system because they are themselves victims and they don't have any other options or they don't have the resources, in all senses of the word, to pull themselves out of where they are. So many of our defendants are repeat customers or customers from the same family. But ... we don't affect any change for them either by sending them to prison. – Mackenzie

Participants described working tirelessly to try and make the criminal justice process meaningful for complainants and victims, only to feel despair at becoming a contributor to the re-victimisation of a complainant through a trial process that was imbalanced from the outset:

If I'm honest in the last few years doing these rape cases ... I just think at the end of the day, what the hell was the point in that? Like why did we go to trial when we knew the odds were against us on that? We've re-victimised her or him, her mainly. And for what? – Jessie

Overall, such cases not only made participants lose faith in the CJS, but they also lost faith in their own abilities as a prosecutor. Not guilty verdicts were taken personally because participants felt a personal responsibility to bring justice for harmed complainants, particularly those victimised by violent offending. Where this responsibility was perceived to have been breached, such as when a not guilty verdict was returned, participants experienced this as a personal failure which detrimentally impacted their wellbeing:

... feeling defeated or feeling, I don't know, just like a loser ((laughs)). Like just feeling like I'm not good at my job, coming back with all these not guilty's or you feel like you're letting people down, that, I bring that home with me a lot of the time. – Jessie

The limited ability to enact meaningful change for defendants and contributing to the

re-traumatisation of complainants/victims through trial were aspects of the role that Crown prosecutors reported as burdensome and undermined the meaningfulness of the role. This transformed into feelings of guilt, sadness, professional inadequacy, and a subsequent sense of helplessness.

3.3. Lack of education, training, and support

Participants suggested that they felt inadequately prepared for their role owing to a lack of education and training. This led to feelings of shock, inadequacy, and increased occupational stress that ultimately exacerbated VT. Two subthemes were developed that captured participants' views that *nothing can prepare you* for the role of a Crown prosecutor and that starting in the role with inadequate training and supervision left them *drowning in the deep end*.

3.3.1. Nothing can prepare you

Participants noted that the solely academic focus of their legal education failed to teach them the practical skills needed for working in the intrinsically difficult criminal justice environment. As such, participants described being blind-sided by traumatic content and lacking the appropriate skills to identify the adverse impacts of trauma work (i.e. VT). This meant that participants were poorly equipped early in their career to navigate the difficulties in the role:

... nothing really prepares you for work in a law firm, in terms of like the content and the practical stuff, like how you do a trial or how you do like a bail hearing or whatever. But also, I don't think law school trains you to deal with the difficult stuff that comes up, like the graphic content or the really difficult people you have to deal with sometimes. – Tyler

For some participants, previous exposure to PTM through working in the CJS (e.g. as a defence lawyer or judge's clerk) provided

some level of protection against the confronting realities encapsulated in PTM:

[Judge's clerking] was really excellent preparation because before then I'd just led a normal life and didn't know about this whole underworld of society and the details of all the grim things that went on. So it was a confronting but useful apprenticeship really because I was given the files to read by the judges obviously to prepare memorandums and things. So ... I worked through adjusting to that new normal while I was with the judges, which was useful when I started here. – Bailey

However, the protective efficacy of previous exposure was dependent on the level of exposure and types of experience in the previous role. For example, one participant who previously worked as a junior defence lawyer described still being confronted by the volume of serious crime in the community, as they had only dealt with lower-level crime as a defence lawyer:

When I started as a defence lawyer, I was really blown away by the sheer amount of crime that can be happening in a community that you can go about without knowing about, but then when I started as a prosecutor, I was then blown away in a different way about how much serious crime is going on the community that, even as a defence lawyer, I didn't know was going on because I wasn't privy to those files or prosecutions. – Kerry

Overall, the lack of practical training in legal education meant Crown prosecutors interviewed felt ill-equipped and ill-prepared for the realities of working in the CJS. This resulted in heightened levels of stress and anxiety through the daily tasks of a Crown prosecutor.

3.3.2. *Drowning in the deep end*

Participants described being vulnerable to stress and VT stemming from inexperience in the role, coupled with a lack of training and supervision in the early stages of their career that felt like being left to 'drown in the deep end':

I thought there would be more training. But there was not really any training ((laughs)) ... I thought because the role was so important and it has such an immediate and significant impact on people's lives, that you would be more heavily supervised or at least supervised ((laughs)) ... You get given your file and you're told to manage it. And you're not told how that should work or really anything. And you sort of work through all the challenges as they arise ... you're just kind of fighting to keep your head above water really. – Mackenzie

Due to the workplace culture, participants described a lack of willingness to disclose their shortcomings in the role. Prolonged stress manifested in mental and somatic symptoms, with one participant disclosing a depression diagnosis early in their career. Further, a lack of or insufficient formal support structures were viewed as fundamental flaws for protecting wellbeing while working with PTM. Some participants described partners as gatekeepers to assessing workplace support, which deterred them from seeking help. In addition, the message that services should only be utilised in 'crisis situations' resulted in participants reconsidering help-seeking, as they believed their symptoms were not severe enough to justify professional help.

Several participants stated that they would only use support services where access was strictly confidential. This relates back to the *workplace culture* where prosecutors disclosed the stigmatisation of mental health and the consequent fear of asking for help from partners and even, as the quote illustrates below, from colleagues:

... depends if my bosses and colleagues would know I had done that or not ... If they did, I wouldn't use it. If I knew for a fact they would never find out whether or not I'd accessed it, maybe I would consider it. – Mackenzie

As a result, participants discussed considering or having privately paid for formal support personally, as it was viewed as the easier

option in terms of accessibility and ensuring confidentiality. However, this was not a tenable long-term solution due to the financial costs involved:

I think also money. Like not that I don't know. Sometimes you know, spending 100 plus a session you'd think oh ... I don't think I'm in a state bad enough to justify that. – Ash

A concerning revelation was that Crown prosecutors were either not aware of the full extent of services available at their firm or unclear whether services were even available because formal support had never been a point of discussion. Participants reported workplaces typically placed the onus on them to self-identify and seek help where necessary. This reflected the culture of the legal profession more generally where reactive help-seeking was viewed as the norm:

I also just think the way that attitudes are in the system ... it leaves a lot up to individuals to look after themselves and to develop their own support networks ... I don't think there's a big focus on making sure proactively, people are doing okay and that the people who are working in the system are coping. – Charlie

Whilst critical of the lack of support and the reactive nature of formal support structures, several Crown prosecutors displayed confidence in their self-recognition of VT and the ability to address this in a timely manner. However, the barriers to accessibility described above will predictably dampen prosecutors' enthusiasm in taking the active step to seek support and address VT symptoms.

4. Discussion

This study explored organisational, interpersonal, and contextual factors perceived to alleviate and exacerbate experiences of VT for New Zealand Crown prosecutors. Factors which were perceived to mitigate against the impacts of working with PTM and promoting

resilience to VT included having a safe and supportive workplace, the rewarding nature of the prosecutor role, and engaging in self-care. In contrast, the pressures of the role, workplace culture, perceptions of injustice, and a lack of training, education and support, were viewed as exacerbating negative wellbeing, inhibiting help-seeking, and increasing vulnerability to VT.

4.1. Workplace culture can either alleviate or exacerbate experiences of VT

Workplace culture was seen to act as both an alleviating factor and occupational stressor. Having a safe and supportive work environment, peer support, and senior staff who shared their own wellbeing challenges were perceived to alleviate the effects of working with PTM, although were noted to be vulnerable to employee turnover. While the effects of work-related factors such as hours worked, workload, level of indirect trauma exposure, and years of experience have received some attention in the lawyer wellbeing literature, organisational and context-specific factors have received less consideration (Iversen & Robertson, 2021; Soon et al., 2024). In the wider VT literature, social and workplace support have been found to be negatively associated with VT (Hensel et al., 2015), suggesting these may act as protective factors for professionals working in environments with indirect trauma exposure. A safe and supportive workplace where work-related challenges can be discussed openly is theorised to facilitate understanding and processing of mental and emotional states and promote help-seeking (Woodhams & Duran, 2024). Further, collegial support is suggested to provide an effective outlet for discussing work-related concerns, creating acceptance of help-seeking, reducing feelings of loneliness and social isolation, and mitigating concerns associated with discussing confidential material (James, 2020; Vrkleviski & Franklin, 2008; Weir et al., 2021; Whittenbury et al., 2024; Zwisohn et al., 2019). Both formal (e.g. mentoring

programmes, peer support networks) and informal peer support have the potential to improve professional development and psychological wellbeing (Burton & Paton, 2021; Weir et al., 2021). However, peer support is only likely to be beneficial if a culture of support is created (and maintained) beyond individual team members, and there is a level of comfort around engaging with the support.

Professional and organisational stigma surrounding VT and the impacts of PTM exposure and an expectation to be ‘perfect’ were identified as significant barriers to help-seeking in the current study. ‘Suck it up’ attitudes held by senior practitioners created anxiety regarding career progression and were viewed to silence people from voicing concerns. Such attitudes are reflective of broader trends in legal workplace culture, where the approach to trauma exposure appears to be to ‘acclimatise’, become ‘immune’, or ‘toughen up’ (James, 2020; Weir et al., 2021). Building awareness of the prevalence, symptoms, and impacts of VT and workplace stress, and normalising accessing support are key to destigmatising VT and promoting staff wellbeing (Burton & Paton, 2021). Professional and organisational environments that promote open communication, support-seeking, and involve employees in the planning and implementation of workplace initiatives can have a positive impact on burnout and work-related stress, reduce stigma around wellbeing, and increase comfortability around accessing support services (Public Health England, 2016; Weir et al., 2021).

4.2. The rewarding nature of the prosecutor role may mitigate the impacts of trauma exposure

The rewarding nature of the prosecutor role was perceived to mitigate some of the negative aspects, consistent with research with police officers (Credé & Price, 2003), healthcare professionals (McGahie et al., 2002), and judges (Schreiver et al., 2024). In the wider literature, ‘service lawyers’ (including prosecutors and

public defence lawyers) have been found to experience more positive affect, higher life satisfaction, and less negative affect than lawyers working in extrinsically oriented subdisciplines (e.g. those working in corporate, commercial, litigation, and tax and estate planning) suggesting that the intrinsic values that motivate people to work in particular areas can make a difference to their experiences of wellbeing (Sheldon & Krieger, 2014). Although prosecutors described their job as stressful and at times overwhelming, personal fulfilment, believing that the role is valuable, and the ability to help others were identified as key factors for continuing in the role. These factors are suggested in the wider literature to be associated with a positive professional identity, a factor believed to contribute to positive wellbeing (Spearing & Field, 2019), as well as lower symptoms of VT, anxiety, and depression (Satuf et al., 2018; Whittenbury et al., 2024).

While job satisfaction and meaningfulness were viewed as protective factors for VT symptoms, a perceived inability to enact change and feelings of injustice exacerbated negative wellbeing. A recent study with Australian judges also identified stressors of injustice rooted in systemic and structural challenges (e.g. overloaded court system, inadequacy of legal remedies, and poor advocacy) as having a negative impact on judicial wellbeing (Schreiver et al., 2024). In the current study, the over-representation of vulnerable and minority groups in the CJS, concerns about retraumatising complainants, negative outcomes (e.g. not guilty verdicts), and the potential for causing further harm were cited as creating feelings of injustice, highlighting context specific challenges associated with different legal roles in the CJS. The feeling of contributing to further harm and victimisation may also invoke moral stress and helplessness in Crown prosecutors due to the irresolvable tension between the prosecutor’s moral sensitivity and perceived external factors, which can further exacerbate existing VT symptoms (DeTienne et al., 2012; Lütznén et al., 2003).

4.3. Workplace and self-care strategies are critical for managing wellbeing

Workplace and external self-care strategies were viewed by participants as important for managing the risk of VT. Avoiding or limiting contact with PTM, emotional detachment, the use of ‘gallows’ or ‘black’ humour, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle were commonly reported strategies for managing the demands of PTM exposure and ensuring prosecutors were mentally prepared to engage with PTM, reflecting findings from the wider lawyer wellbeing literature (Vrklevski & Franklin, 2008; Weir et al., 2021, 2022). While maintaining a healthy lifestyle was highlighted as important for creating boundaries between prosecutors’ personal and professional lives, research with Australian personal injury lawyers and Canadian Crown prosecutors highlights the challenges with balancing self-care and work culture demands, with workload and the expectation of working long hours often taking precedence over self-care (Gomme & Hall, 1995; Popa et al., 2024). These factors were also perceived to exacerbate VT in the current study. Encouraging the setting of boundaries, taking of breaks, and promoting opportunities for engagement in reflection, relaxation, and social contact are some ways self-care can be supported by employers which may in turn protect against experiences of VT (Burton & Paton, 2021; Cho, 2020).

Views towards professional support such as mental health services, counselling, or therapy were mixed, with some participants identifying therapy as a useful means of debriefing while others were frustrated by the lack of understanding or concrete advice offered by therapists. The scepticism towards professional mental health support may be reflective of the more conservative views held by the legal profession generally. For example, in a study of Australian lawyers, Medlow et al. (2011) found that while their participants reported high rates of distress and depression, they also reported lower perceived helpfulness of conventional mental health treatments in favour of

self-administrable treatments such as being physically active, changing diet, or reading self-help books. The relatively favourable views towards self-directed care over conventional, professional support suggests practitioners require a level of self-awareness in identifying and managing VT (Pearlman & McKay, 2008). There is some promising evidence that psychoeducation programmes can be effective for both increasing self-awareness of the signs and symptoms of distress and reducing negative wellbeing impacts associated with working with traumatic material (Kim et al., 2022). While increasing awareness of the signs and symptoms of VT is a critical first step for supporting criminal lawyers’ work with PTM, if lawyers do not feel comfortable to seek support due to workplace culture, financial, and time pressure barriers, the benefits of such interventions may become a moot point.

4.4. Education and training to better prepare prosecutors and support resilience

Participants described feeling ill-prepared for their role including the adverse impacts of PTM exposure. Legal education was criticised for focusing exclusively on academic knowledge in lieu of any education around the practicalities of working as a criminal lawyer. The shortcomings of existing legal education models for adequately preparing law students for the realities of practicing as a lawyer is an opinion commonly expressed in lawyer wellbeing research (Jones et al., 2021). Legal scholars are increasingly advocating for the inclusion of practical experience during law school (e.g. Hammond, 1999; Oh, 2016; Sear et al., 2019; Wu & Mo, 2016) and education about the traumatic content inherent in criminal law work (James, 2008; Katz & Haldar, 2016). Professional identity, including what it means to be a lawyer, expected behaviours and characteristics, and attitudes towards wellbeing are significantly developed during legal education (Jones et al., 2021). Providing information about trauma theory and VT could

provide protective benefits through the development of a positive professional identity towards wellbeing, as well as equipping students entering the legal profession to manage trauma exposure and develop self-care practices to manage the risk of VT (James, 2023). Clinical legal education has been suggested as one approach for providing law students with integrated training in legal theory, trauma theory, and skills practice, alongside pastoral support and supervision (James, 2023). Pilots of integrated clinic models report positive experiences for students and an improvement in student confidence following participation (Bozin et al., 2020). Similar integrated approaches might be considered within the current structure of legal instruction in New Zealand, to help prepare law students for entering the profession.

While preparatory training through legal education represents one mechanism for supporting criminal lawyers with PTM exposure in their role, this is likely insufficient on its own. Ongoing training and support throughout practitioners' legal careers are needed to ensure long-term sustained benefits. While other industries have embedded strategies for managing the negative impacts of working with PTM into practice expectations and guidelines (e.g. supervision amongst mental health professionals; Berger & Quiros, 2016), the legal profession has made slow progress, with no clear requirements for supervision or training for Crown prosecutors. Wellbeing training available on an ongoing basis as part of legal education and continued professional development can raise awareness of the risks associated with working with PTM and the symptoms and impacts of VT (Burton & Paton, 2021; James, 2020; Weir et al., 2021). In addition, regular clinical-style supervision can also support staff to understand and explore the impacts of their work and develop skills to prepare for future potential trauma exposure (Burton & Paton, 2021; Mason, 2025; Rose & Maylea, 2023).

4.5. Implications

Crown prosecutors who work with PTM currently have limited resources for managing problems relating to VT. No single intervention will fully address the issues identified which exacerbate criminal legal professionals' frequent and cumulative exposure to PTM. A coordinated and sustained approach that reduces factors that exacerbate the risks of VT and promotes protective factors at the individual, organisational, and profession level is required. More specifically, addressing professional and organisational factors that exacerbate VT are critical for developing work environments that promote individual, occupational, and interpersonal protective factors and support lawyers to thrive.

Changing professional culture is not an easy undertaking. Discussions about the need for greater emotional support for legal professionals have been taking place for some time (Gomme & Hall, 1995); however, the 'toughen up' culture of detachment remains a significant barrier. The profession has developed in this regard over the last decade, with increasing acknowledgement of the mental health and wellbeing impacts of working as a legal professional (Burton & Paton, 2021). Nonetheless, the next steps of implementation and cultural change are notably more difficult, with efforts thus far appearing to have made little difference to occupational culture on the ground. In recent years, several jurisdictions have published best practice guidelines to support firms to promote psychologically safe and healthy workplaces; for example, the wellbeing Toolkit developed by the American Bar Association (Brafford, 2018). Development of evidence-informed best practice guidelines can signal a commitment to lawyer wellbeing, establish professional and organisational infrastructure, policies, and practices to reduce stigma, and promote a supportive occupational culture (National Task Force on Lawyer Wellbeing, 2017).

Organisations that actively encourage accessing support create an environment

where employees are less concerned about mental health stigma and feel more comfortable prioritising wellbeing and accessing both peer and professional support (Weir et al., 2021). Normalising taking breaks and seeking support (e.g. through modelling by senior staff), particularly when working with PTM, should be encouraged. Wellbeing check-ins, trauma training, reflective practice, peer support networks, and clinical supervision have all been suggested as ways to mitigate the impacts of trauma work for lawyers and create a trauma-informed workplace (Burton & Paton, 2021; Mason, 2025; Pike & Rebar, 2024; Rose & Maylea, 2023). However, given the lack of empirical research on the effectiveness of wellbeing interventions with legal professionals, further research is needed to evaluate the efficacy of these interventions with this group.

4.6. Strengths and limitations

This study represents the first New Zealand-based research to qualitatively explore factors which may alleviate or exacerbate experiences of VT for criminal lawyers and adds to the emerging literature on protective factors for VT in justice professionals. The qualitative design allowed for the identification of a range of risk and protective factors derived from the lived experiences of New Zealand Crown prosecutors. Further, data were collected from practitioners working in a range of firms across New Zealand and from Crown prosecutors of different experience levels, genders, and ethnicities ensuring a range of voices were heard.

While the current study has several key strengths, it is important to note that due to time constraints it was not possible to recruit from all Crown Solicitor firms in New Zealand. Further, as there is little research examining protective factors for VT in the wider lawyer wellbeing literature, it is unclear whether legal professionals working in different roles both within the New Zealand CJS or in different jurisdictions have shared or differing experiences. Finally, while this study

examined factors perceived to alleviate and exacerbate Crown prosecutors' experience of VT, the impact of these on VT symptoms was not assessed. Therefore, whether the factors identified are associated with a measurable increase or decrease in VT symptoms and/or wider psychological wellbeing has yet to be established. Future research would benefit from building on the current research and exploring the statistical relationship between the alleviating and exacerbating factors reported in this study and VT symptomatology.

4.7. Future research directions

The current research highlights the importance of organisational and workplace factors in alleviating and exacerbating VT in criminal lawyers. Future research would benefit from including professional, organisational, and workplace factors in quantitative examinations of risk and protective factors for lawyer wellbeing as well as exploring the interaction between these factors and individual vulnerabilities in the development of VT. Longitudinal qualitative and quantitative studies conducted across the career-span of criminal justice workers may also improve understanding of the aetiology of VT and how individual, workplace, and organisational factors may influence this over time. Research evaluating the effectiveness of specific interventions designed to reduce the risk of VT and/or boost protective factors in trauma-exposed legal professionals will help to identify effective interventions for this population.

4.8. Conclusions

Crown prosecutors play a critical role in the effective operation of the New Zealand CJS. Their work is important for victims, defendants, society, and for Crown prosecutors themselves. The importance and the value of the work undertaken by Crown prosecutors and the passion that drives them to commit to their role with dedication and enthusiasm, despite

the inherent difficulties, is not adequately acknowledged or supported. The professional and organisational culture that prosecutors operate within often makes the role more challenging. Given exposure to disturbing content is central to Crown prosecutors' work, it is critical the profession takes proactive steps to mitigate the risk of subsequent harm. To ensure Crown prosecutors can perform their role while maintaining their personal well-being, improved legal education and training at the start and throughout the legal career, and improved accessibility, communication of and support for the challenges of the role, are urgently required.

Ethical standards

Declaration of conflicts of interest

Bo (Rachel) Kim has declared no conflicts of interest.

Harry J. Dent has declared no conflicts of interest.

Nichola Tyler has declared no conflicts of interest.

Yvette M. Tinsley has declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee (Ref: 2805) and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because of the confidential and potentially identifiable nature of the data. We therefore do not have participants' consent or ethics approval to make the raw data (interview transcripts) available to other researchers or interested parties.

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