

'A significant violation of trust': Health providers investigated over sexual misconduct claims



Henrietta Cook

July 6, 2026 – 5:01am

More than 230 Victorian health providers have been investigated over alleged sexual misconduct over the past six years, with unregistered massage therapists accounting for the highest number of claims.

The findings, detailed in a new report from the Health Complaints Commissioner, have reignited calls for massage therapists, as well as counsellors, to face mandatory safety checks and other safeguards to protect clients.

Massage therapists – who are not required to be registered, undergo police checks or have formal qualifications – were the subject of 68 of the sexual misconduct allegations.



The state's health watchdog has received a steady stream of sexual misconduct claims about health providers. STEPHEN KIPRILLIS

They were followed by doctors (50 complaints) and counsellors (28 complaints).

“These numbers are pretty persistent – they’re not really going up or down,” Health Complaints Commissioner, Adjunct Professor Bernice Redley, said of the 235 complaints that her watchdog closed between July 1, 2019, and June 30, 2025.

“My concern is that the issue remains under-reported.”

The allegations included sexual penetration without consent, kissing and hugging, massaging breasts and buttocks, inadequate draping, requesting that a client undress more than necessary (including removing underwear) and exposure of breasts and genitals.

Victorians also detailed allegations about health providers recording or distributing intimate or sexualised images and sexually harassing them.

In one case, a massage therapist was charged with three counts of rape and one count of sexual assault against a female client.

The woman, whom the Health Complaints Commissioner referred to as Sally, grew increasingly uncomfortable with her therapist after he called her “sexy”, touched her breast and then sexually assaulted her with his fingers during her final appointment.

“Sally told our investigators she felt embarrassed that she had not challenged the therapist’s behaviour during the appointments and blamed herself for what had occurred,” the commissioner said.

With the woman’s consent, the commissioner reported the incident to police, who commenced their own investigation and later charged the therapist, who pleaded guilty in court.

While the police investigation was under way, the watchdog issued an Interim Prohibition Order preventing the therapist from practising. It later permanently banned the provider from delivering any health services.

This masthead revealed in December that [at least nine Victorian massage therapists had been convicted of rape or sexual assaults over the space of five years.](#)

“It is a significant violation of trust,” Redley said of the situation.

Unlike doctors, nurses, dentists and other registered health professionals, massage therapists are not legally required to have formal qualifications or be registered with the

Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency.



Health Complaints Commissioner Adjunct Professor Bernice Redley. JASON SOUTH

The self-regulated industry is instead monitored under a “negative licensing” system that allows authorities to investigate complaints and ban individuals who threaten public safety. They must comply with the National Code of Conduct for Health Care Workers, which sets out expectations of health workers.

The Association of Massage Therapists, which is among several industry groups enforcing a voluntary code of ethics and professional standards to oversee their members, has long argued that the current system does not adequately protect the public.

It has been advocating for mandatory qualifications, compulsory criminal record checks, and the inclusion of massage therapists in a centralised national register.

“At the moment, you can set up a practice and the next day say you’re a massage therapist, there’s no barrier to entry,” said the association’s chief executive, Rebecca Barnett.

“Generally speaking, the therapy is provided with some level of undress. That extra level of vulnerability would explain the level of complaints you are seeing.”

The Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia has been calling for tougher regulations for almost three decades. It recently highlighted the case of a convicted child sex offender in NSW who was able to pose as a counsellor because of the absence of mandated qualifications. He did this to come into contact with children.

Johanna de Wever, the chief executive of the peak body, said that while the sector's self-regulation was well-intentioned, it had created a real patchwork of different standards.

She said it was problematic that anyone could call themselves a counsellor without any qualification, and the term should be protected under national health laws.

"Any complaints are disappointing, and not to be tolerated in a clinical workforce working with vulnerable people," de Wever said. "The people who end up at the Health Complaints Commissioner tend to be those who are not registered as counsellors and are not held accountable by organisations such as ours."

Membership of the organisation is voluntary and requires completion of an accredited qualification, typically a three-year bachelor's degree or postgraduate training. They must complete 20 hours of professional development and 10 hours of clinical supervision annually, consistent with new national standards for counsellors and psychotherapists.

The report noted that significant regulatory action had been taken against 12 per cent of identified providers.

Of the 214 providers identified in the complaints, 25 were subject to regulatory orders. Some 141 interim and permanent prohibition orders and three warning statements were issued.

All sexual misconduct allegations about a registered provider, such as a doctor, were transferred to AHPRA.

It said that changes introduced in 2023 had escalated more sexual misconduct complaints to experienced investigators, with fewer complaints now closed during the initial stages. The University of Melbourne's Professor Marie Bismark, who has conducted the world's largest study of sexual misconduct among registered health practitioners, said professions where sensitive conversations or treatments occurred behind closed doors were at highest risk of sexual misconduct allegations.



Professor Marie Bismark from the University of Melbourne.

“Massage therapists and counsellors clearly fit into that description,” said Bismark, who is also a psychiatrist and lawyer. “Whereas when you go to see your dentist, there’s likely to be a dental therapist or an assistant in the room with you.”

Bismark said that while some sexual misconduct claims related to predatory behaviour with a sexual motivation, others stemmed from poor communication.

“It may be that there has just been really poor communication by the therapist about why they were touching that part of the body, why they had asked the patient to undress,” she said.

“It’s really important to explain what you’re planning to do, and to obtain the patient’s consent, and check in with them around their level of comfort.”

Earlier this year, Australian health ministers released their response to an independent review of health practitioner regulation, which recommended expanding the scheme to include high-risk professions including massage therapy.

The ministers agreed to support further work on assessing professions for entry to the scheme.

A federal government spokeswoman said reports of sexual abuse from massage therapists were abhorrent.

“All patients should feel safe when dealing with health professionals,” she said.

A Victorian government spokeswoman said the Health Complaints Commissioner had powers to investigate complaints and take action against any general healthcare provider, including unregistered practitioners, who posed a risk to public safety.

“Every Victorian deserves to feel safe when accessing healthcare, and any form of sexual misconduct by a health provider is completely unacceptable.”

MORE: [Healthcare](#) [For subscribers](#) [Courts](#)



[Henrietta Cook](#) is a senior reporter covering health for The Age. Henrietta joined The Age in 2012 and has previously covered state politics, education and consumer affairs. Connect via [X](#), [Facebook](#) or [email](#).