

Media Release

19 February 2003

\$2 million for GPs to reduce risk of suicide in people with alcohol and substance abuse

Australia's Divisions of General Practice will receive \$2 million today to strengthen the level of care for people with alcohol abuse and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

Announced in Sydney today, The Alcohol Education Rehabilitation Foundation (AER), which backs projects throughout Australia that tackle alcohol and licit drug abuse, will provide \$2 million to the Australian Divisions of General Practice.

Mr Daryl Smeaton, Chief Executive Officer of the Alcohol Education Research Foundation said, "people suffering from alcohol and substance abuse are at a greater risk of suffering from other mental health problems such as depression than the general population.

"Substance abuse when complicated by other mental health disorders has been recognised as having a poorer diagnosis and being more difficult to treat than people without these complications.

"There is strong evidence to suggest that mental health problems place the patient at greater risk of suicide and this is complicated further by a co-morbid condition such as alcohol or substance abuse," said Mr Smeaton.

The Managing Alcohol Misuse and Mental Health Co-morbidity in Primary Care project, aims to:

- Actively involve general practitioners in the management of alcohol dependence/problem drinking and promotion of responsible drinking;
- Provide resources such as education materials; and
- Enhance the treatment of people with substance abuse and co-morbid mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety in general practice.

"Suicide rates for people not receiving adequate treatment are at greater risk of suicide and projects aimed at ensuring better care and management for these consumers are critical.

"Very few people seek or receive treatment and that is why it is critical that we can upskill doctors to identify and more effectively treat consumers who do present in their surgeries," said Mr Smeaton.

Dr Rob Walters, Australian Division of General Practice Chair said, "We know that up to 30 per cent of consumers seeing a GP are drinking alcohol at risky levels and we also know that people who suffer from depression or anxiety have a greater risk of substance abuse.

"Divisions of General Practice are currently doing some excellent and innovative work in this area and this project will further strengthen this.

“Substance abuse can impact on all aspects of life, causing disruption to family relationships, work absenteeism and lead to greater risk of suicide.

“GPs encounter people with problems in both addictions and mental health frequently and the doctor is best placed to advise on safe levels of alcohol consumption.

“However, such interventions are not effective unless conditions such as depression are addressed and treated at the same time.”

Project partners include The Mental Health Council of Australia, The Australian Primary Care Resource Centre based at Flinders University, the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

MHCA chief executive Dr Grace Groom says that a significant proportion of the Australian population is affected by co-morbid alcohol abuse and depression or anxiety.

The prevention and management of co-morbid substance abuse and mental illness was the second highest priority in the Council’s recent national survey of the community’s priorities for mental health reform.

“We congratulate the Alcohol Education and Research Foundation on the leadership it is showing on this important health issue and we look forward to our involvement with the Preventing and Managing Alcohol and Mental Health Co-morbidity in Primary Care Project,” Dr Groom said.

Mr Smeaton said “The Foundation is highly supportive of projects with the potential to create an enduring benefit for communities, and ensure that GPs are equipped to provide the better health outcomes.”

About AERF

The Foundation is committed to fostering partnerships within the public and private sectors to ensure that important alcohol and licit substance abuse programs are give every chance of making a real difference. To date we have provided \$30 million in grants across Australia.

The Foundation will soon establish a major public fund so that our work and the national grants program can continue well into the future.

The Foundation is an independent organization that was set up in 2001 by the Federal Government. Its charter is to enhance the capacity of the alcohol and other drugs sector to address alcohol and other licit substance abuse.

About ADGP

The Australian Divisions of General Practice is the peak national body representing the 120 Divisions of General Practice in Australia. About 95 per cent of GPs are members of a local Division.

- Ends -

For further information contact: Jennifer Tear (02) 6295 3522 or 0438 630 881