



04/23

# News Release

Australian Divisions of General Practice Ltd.

23/6/04

## **GPs in the front-line of alcohol / mental health burden**

Australia's GPs are in the front-line of the fight to help the 25 per cent of Australians who suffer a combination of alcohol misuse and mental health problems.

In this National Drug Action Week, from June 21-25, Chair of the Australian Divisions of General Practice (ADGP), Dr Rob Walters, has highlighted the vital role played by GPs in managing the one in four Australians with an anxiety, affective or substance use disorder who have at least one other disorder - known as comorbidity.

"It is common for people to experience mental health problems and alcohol and other substance abuse disorders simultaneously," Dr Walters said.

"Most people with alcohol and other drug problems do not seek help from specific alcohol and drug services. This is particularly the case for people also suffering from a mental health problem.

"It is GPs who see the majority of comorbidity in the community. GPs are therefore best placed to provide thorough assessment, early intervention, treatment and management of co-morbidity.

"But many GPs work alone and can often feel isolated in managing drug, alcohol and mental health issues.

"GPs need a system which supports them to work collaboratively with a number of specialist and local community services to manage comorbidity in a more co-ordinated, integrated and comprehensive way. However, shared care for comorbidity is generally not available."

ADGP, the peak body representing Divisions of General Practice, has tackled this problem through a project to help GPs better care for people experiencing problems with alcohol misuse as well as mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

The Alcohol Education & Rehabilitation Foundation is providing funding over two years to assist Divisions to improve the primary care response to people with alcohol misuse and mental illness comorbidity. Other partners in this project are the Mental Health Council of Australia, the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the Department of Health and Ageing and the Primary Mental Health Australian Resource Centre.

"This initiative will provide GPs with education and training in the management and prevention of co-morbidity, develop resources for GPs, practice staff, consumers and carers, and provide funding for a number of Divisions to pursue other approaches such as building systems or models of collaborative care and strengthening referral pathways with local health and other providers," said Dr Walters.

"The project is the first of a staged approach in improving the general practice capacity in treating co-morbidity. It will enhance the work already undertaken by GPs with the world leading *Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care* Initiative where alcohol misuse disorders are included as treatable disorders.

"But it is only a start. The level of funding for an improved response to comorbidity continues to fall short. Youth, Indigenous communities and the elderly are three groups that need specific, systematic and comprehensive approaches to comorbidity problems."

*ADGP is the peak national body representing Australia's 120 Divisions of General Practice. About 95 per cent of GPs belong to a local Division of General Practice.*

**For comment:** Dr Rob Walters, ADGP Chair, 0418 127 123  
**For further information:** Kerry Ungerer, 0412 424 309