

# Primary Mental Health Care

## Mental Health in the Community

Mental health disorders and problems are common. The 1997 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing of Adults (ABS, 1997) found that almost one in five of the adult population had a mental disorder at some time during the 12 months prior to the survey. The prevalence of mental health problems in children and adolescents is 14 per cent. Higher prevalence exists among children living in low income, step/blended and sole-parent families (Sawyer, et al 2000).

The majority of mental health care in Australia is delivered through general practice and other primary care services. In 2000/01, almost 11 million GP services were mental health related (AIHW, 2003). General practitioners (GPs) provide mental health care to 75 per cent of those who seek help – either through direct care, shared care or referral.

## Policy Frameworks

1998 saw the introduction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Mental Health Plan under Australia's *National Mental Health Strategy*. The Plan took a broader, population health approach to mental health activity, paying more attention to high prevalence disorders and their impact on individuals, families and communities. For the first time, primary care, and general practice in particular, was recognised by Health Ministers as a key setting for mental health prevention, early intervention and treatment. Mental health policy and service delivery was no longer considered limited to specialist mental health services.

Building mental health capacity and skills in both general practice and within relevant programs run by Divisions of General Practice such as drug and alcohol, mental health and youth health has been a progressive process.

Two particular initiatives that are a fusion of general practice and mental health policy have spearheaded primary mental health care developments: the June 1999 *National Primary Mental Health Care Network* and the 2001 *Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care Initiative*.

## National Primary Mental Health Care Network

The *National Primary Mental Health Care Network* was funded in June 1999 and continues to be funded today. The Initiative comprises a National Co-ordinator based at ADGP, Mental Health Development and Liaison Officers (DLOs) in each State Based Organisation of General Practice (SBO) and the Australian Primary Mental Health Care Resource Centre based at the Department of General Practice, Flinders University.

The Initiative's main task is to promote and encourage quality primary mental health care through education and training and other capacity building strategies. The Network has provided key mental health infrastructure at the national and state levels, previously lacking in the Divisions Network. The Network plays a key role in:

- Leading and supporting change;
- Promoting mental health through national and state-wide conferences, and forums, newsletters, regular seminars for Divisional mental health program officers, and other communication strategies;
- Promoting innovation, systems linkage and integration, and shared care through partnerships, networks, and sustainable relationships

See overleaf

- between stakeholders, Divisions, State and Commonwealth governments, non-government and community organisations; Strategies have included the development of MOUs or service agreements, GP liaison positions, and service directories;
  - Supporting primary mental health care reform through the roll-out of *Better Outcomes*, peer support programs in mental health, and skills-based education and training, including in areas of particular need such as parenting; and
  - Influencing policy and practice through participation and representation on state and national committees.
- Focused Psychological Strategies - to encourage appropriately trained GPs to provide evidence-based psychological strategies (FPS) through the provision of Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) rebates
  - Access to Allied Health Services - to enable GPs to access psychological and other allied health services to support their patients with mental health disorders; and
  - Access to Psychiatrist Support - to better enable psychiatrists and GPs to participate in case conferencing and for psychiatrists to provide advice to support GPs.

### **Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care Network**

GPs don't always have the skills to deliver quality mental health care. They need support. The *Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care Network*, introduced in the 2001/02 Federal Budget, offers a *system* of mental health care, responding to the barriers to mental health care commonly expressed by GPs such as the need for relevant training, access to specialist support and improved remuneration for the time spent on mental health consultations. Indeed, the *Better Outcomes* initiative was developed to address the key support issues raised by GPs over many years.

*Better Outcomes* is based on international evidence that indicates improvement in mental health outcomes at the population-level is best achieved through a whole system that combines primary care with specialist interventions in an integrated way.

The key components of the Network are:

- Education and training for GPs - to familiarise GPs with the Network and to increase the mental health skills;
- The 3 Step Mental Health Process – remuneration is provided to GPs providing quality, comprehensive mental health care through an assessment, a mental health plan and a review;

*Better Outcomes* represents a major change for general practice. However, uptake nationally within the first year has exceeded all expectations. Almost 1 in 7 GPs nationally are registered. Participation is almost as high as 1 in 4 in some States, such as Western Australia. The allied health component has been a particular drawcard for GPs who have found better access to allied health support has resulted in improved clinical outcomes for patients and improved management in the primary care setting. Allied health services under *Better Outcomes* presently covers 76 Divisions of General Practice with 100 per cent uptake envisaged by 2004-05.

### **Future Directions**

Australia's new national mental health plan 2003-2008 continues to place a high priority on primary mental health care reform. You can view the plan at [www.mentalhealth.gov.au](http://www.mentalhealth.gov.au) under Resources and Publications. ADGP has developed a Mental Health Policy in consultation with Divisions and GPs called Primary Mental Health Care: The Next Ten Years. Go to [www.adgp.com.au](http://www.adgp.com.au), national programs to download.

Leanne Wells  
Principal Adviser  
Mental Health  
Australian Division of General Practice  
Ph 02 6228 0854  
Fax 02 6228 0899  
E-mail [lwells@adgp.com.au](mailto:lwells@adgp.com.au)

