



News Release

Australian Divisions of General Practice Ltd.

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Looming Crisis in Mental Health Care, say GPs

A recent *Medical Journal of Australia* review on health care reform says mental health is today's top health priority in Australia. The report also comes in the wake of recent media reports about the state of mental health service reform in NSW.

However, the peak body representing Divisions of General Practice, the Australian Divisions of General Practice (ADGP) says that mental health care is faced with major shortfalls in funding.

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

Almost 1 in 5 Australians suffer a mental health problem or disorder, yet only just over a third of those seek help from a health service.

"With statistics like these, the level of need is obvious. The community needs better access to mental health services and providers need support to offer effective and coordinated care" says Dr Rob Walters, ADGP Chair.

Dr Walters says, "It is a myth to think that people with a mental health problem are treated by specialist services. The great majority of the mental health care in this country is delivered by GPs.

"Depression is the second most common illness seen in general practice, but GPs are not always able to manage health problems without back-up from professional colleagues and support services.

"There is a looming crisis in primary mental health care. A lack of funding and delayed roll-out of key components under the world-leading *Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care* Initiative has meant that Divisions of General Practice are not able to satisfy GP demand for psychological services.

"Despite this scheme, access to specialist support remains extremely limited. GPs are being told they can only refer a handful of patients for psychological treatment.

"Funding for Divisions to boost the number of psychological services available to their GPs must urgently be increased. ADGP calls for a 50 per cent a year increase in the allied health budget over five years.

"We need to look at a range of options for delivering quality care in the community using the pivotal role Divisions can play," he says.

ADGP has welcomed the Health Ministers' Mental Health Plan for 2003-2008 but warns Australia's reputation as a world leader in this area, and the health gains it will achieve, are at serious risk if mental health reform in Australia is stalled due to lack of funding and government leadership.

"All governments must commit funding to and accelerate key aspects of the Plan to improve GP access to support from public mental health services," Dr Walters says.

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