



**Submission to the Royal Commission into
Aged Care Quality and Safety**

MARCH 2019

Mental Health Australia welcomed the inclusion of mental health in the Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety. Mental health issues are of particular concern for older people with over half of permanent aged care residents experiencing symptoms of depression.¹

This submission highlights current structural arrangements, which impede the provision of timely and appropriate identification and treatment of mental health conditions in older Australians. It also suggests particular areas of focus for the Royal Commission in order to improve care of older Australians experiencing mental health conditions.

There are complex interactions between mental illness and age related cognitive decline (such as dementia) which should be considered during diagnosis and treatment of older people. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners' advice on 'Medical care of older persons in residential aged care facilities' details the complex interactions between delirium, dementia and depression.² Acknowledging the skill required to work through such complexity, the Australian Medical Association calls for residents of aged care facilities to have access to medical staff (to complement aged care staff) in order to appropriately diagnose and treat dementia and psychogeriatric issues.³ Different strategies will be required to address the mental health issues of older Australians in residential aged care and community settings.

Residential aged care

Mental Health Australia supports the Australian Medical Association's position that "when an older person is no-longer able, or chooses not, to remain at home, a range of residential care options, which can cater to their physical and psycho-social needs should be available irrespective of their financial position."⁴

In Australia, 45% of newly admitted aged care residents have symptoms of depression,⁵ as do 52% of all aged care permanent residents.⁶ This statistic indicates that the current arrangements for treatment of mental health conditions in residential aged care are inadequate. On entering residential aged care people should receive immediate clinical, allied and psychosocial support services and continue to receive care if needed.

The Australian Medical Association states that "Dementia and psychogeriatric care require access to medical practitioners and other staff, and facilities, to complement geriatric services" and "Adequately trained staff must be available to provide quality care."⁷ However, Medicare rebates are not available for residents of aged care facilities for GP Mental Health Treatment Plans and the associated allied health services. This barrier to mental health professionals should be removed so that residents of aged care facilities have access to the same mental health treatments and care as older Australians who are fortunate enough to live independently.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013, Depression in residential aged care 2008-2012, p. 6

² Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, 2006, Medical care of older persons in residential aged care facilities, pp. 24-35

³ Australian Medical Association, 2018, AMA Position Statement: Health and Care of Older People, p. 4

⁴ Australian Medical Association, 2018, AMA Position Statement: Health and Care of Older People, p. 3

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013, Depression in residential aged care, p. 7

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013, Depression in residential aged care, p. 6

⁷ Australian Medical Association, 2018, AMA Position Statement: Health and Care of Older People, p.4



Although Mental Health Australia welcomed the Australian Government 2018-19 Budget measure, investing \$82.5 million in new mental health services for people living in residential aged care, it is unclear what this measure will deliver and in which locations. Mental Health Australia's view is that a more comprehensive, permanent and nationally consistent approach to providing mental health support is needed. The Royal Commission should consider:

- the benefits of extending the application of GP Mental Health Treatment Plans to residents of aged care facilities
- appropriate mechanisms to encourage mental health professionals to practice in residential aged care settings
- funding arrangements for psychosocial supports services for residents of aged care facilities
- increasing mental health literacy among all residential aged care staff.

Mental Health Australia's view is that this approach would enable early identification at the onset of symptoms, accurate diagnosis by a skilled health professional and treatment by a mental health specialist with the ultimate goal of reducing symptoms of mental illness and psychosocial disability residents of aged care facilities.

Community-based aged care

Older people living in the community have access to clinical supports through a GP Mental Health Treatment Plan or through Commonwealth Government Home Care Packages. However, people over the age of 65 are not eligible to apply for access to a National Disability Insurance Scheme individualised package to obtain psychosocial support. This latter policy of Government assumes that its aged care policies and programs provide adequate support. Mental Health Australia is not aware if Australians over the age of 65 can access psychosocial supports services through home care packages, but we think not as our members have not identified it as a business model. While there is no mention of an age barrier to access psychosocial support through the National Psychosocial Support Program, the funding is very limited and unlikely to stretch to people who have limited mobility. Emerging information about this program indicates that it may have differing access criteria in each state and territory.

The Royal Commission should consider a mechanism to enable access for older people to community based psychosocial support to complement the clinical support provided through GP Mental Health Treatment Plans or Home Care Packages.

The Royal Commission's consideration of the mental health response for older Australia will provide the opportunity to meet the World Health Organization's Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020 Life Course Approach. This principle encourages countries to ensure "Policies, plans and services for mental health... take account of health and social needs at all stages of the life course, including... older age."⁸ Mental Health Australia encourages the Royal Commission to seize this important opportunity to improve the mental health of older Australians.

⁸ World Health Organization, ND, Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020, p. 10

Mental Health Australia



Mentally healthy people,
mentally healthy communities

Mental Health Australia is the peak independent, national representative body of the mental health sector in Australia.

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