

It's time to make access to mental health care a reality for all

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As so many Australians who have needed mental health care know, the ideal of universal access to the services they need is a fiction.

The Productivity Commission's draft report on mental health points to "a once in a generation opportunity to reform our mental health system", the Consumers Health Forum has said in its response to the report.

"Australia has a universal mental health system in principle but not in practice, and we need to begin a process of significant investment and reform to change this," the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said.

"The pain of mental health is profound. But so is the cost to the economy, estimated by the Commission conservatively at up to \$51 billion per year. Additionally, there is approximately \$130 billion in costs associated with diminished health and reduced life expectancy for those living with mental ill-health.

"The Commission has set a persuasive case for mental health care and we urge governments to commit to implementing the final recommendations as a comprehensive package. Picking and choosing some elements will not achieve the level of transformation needed to achieve a more responsive, person-centred and better coordinated mental health system for all Australians.

"CHF supports a shift towards prevention, early intervention and coordinated community support through the primary health care setting. We support a stepped model of care with the capability to step up into higher intensity services where required.

"Too often people in need of ongoing mental health care can become stranded between incomplete primary services and the need for some immediate psychiatric

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care that is either not available or beyond their means. That plight should be unacceptable in Australia.

“We believe services are best planned and integrated regionally and facilitated by local governance with pooled funding arrangements, including an expanded, integrating role for Primary Health Networks. This should be accompanied by stringent public performance and accountability arrangements governing an expanded commissioning role for PHNs.

“PHNs will need to have access to appropriate levels of flexible funds and to operate under highly transparent performance and accountability arrangements, which are currently not in place. Investment is also required to ensure all PHNs develop the necessary capabilities, including commissioning maturity and skills, to be effective stewards of integrated care at the regional level.

“CHF supports the Commission’s strong focus on the social determinants of mental health. We call for both the health impacts of climate change and the inadequate level of Newstart to be addressed in the final report as both impact significantly on the mental health wellbeing of consumers and communities.

“We have identified a number of the Commission’s recommendations as priority areas including those relating to reforms for regional mental health funding, providing better alternatives to emergency departments, increasing homelessness funding and strengthening the peer workforce. It is critical that the final report gives governments a clear pathway forward to implement reforms over the short, medium and longer terms.

“Australia has had a profusion of reports on the sorry state of mental health care. Now we need a clear direction and prompt action,” Ms Wells said.

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