Fact Sheet 9 – What this means for General Practice and primary health care

Key issues

- Much of the clinical responsibility for providing mental health care sits with primary health care providers—GPs, nurses, allied health professionals, Aboriginal health workers and community health workers. This reflects both the treatment preferences of many Australians and the availability and affordability of health care services.

- Unfortunately, physical health and mental health often are viewed and managed as separate issues.

- General Practice and the broader primary health care team is the area where a holistic approach to the overall needs of the person, their family and other support people should be brought together, and must be acknowledged and resourced as the clinical front line in tackling mental health issues.

- To achieve this, we need to build the capacity of the Primary Health Care sector to increase service access to a greater proportion of people with mental health problems, and deliver effective prevention and early intervention programs.

- We also need to develop the mental health competence of General Practitioners (GP) and collaborative teams and provide them appropriate support services and decision making tools to assess and manage the mental health needs of their patients.

- This approach will be complemented by improving community education to assist individuals understand the options available for managing mental health problems, including how to access information, self-care and self-delivered services, online and telephone supports.

Key responses

- A clear direction from the review is that physical and mental health (and likewise physical and mental health systems) should not be seen as separate, but rather as interdependent and mutually integral in protecting, promoting and achieving overall wellbeing.

- A “person-centred approach” is the fundamental principle guiding the Commission’s recommendations. In a person-centred mental health system, services are organised around the needs of people, rather than people being required to organise themselves around the system and service providers.

- A person-centred approach means that, as a person’s needs change, their care team will change accordingly. People are not transferred from one team to another but remain connected throughout, to a General Practice, Community Mental Health Service, or Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (ACCHO) and with an ongoing core relationship with their family and other support people.
The Commission recommends shifting funding priorities from hospitals and income support to community and primary health care services that increase service access.

The Commission also recommends strengthening the central role of GPs in mental health care through incentives for use of evidence-based practice, changes to the Medicare Benefits Schedule, and staged implementation of Medical Homes for Mental Health.

The Commission supports a stepped care approach, which helps individuals and families to take greater responsibility for their own mental and physical wellbeing.

A stepped care approach begins with a focus on self-care and individual and community wellbeing, and advances through resourcing based on risk and need.

The Commission considers the involvement of General Practice and the primary health care sector one of the fundamental elements of the stepped care approach.

A fundamental design feature for reform involves integrating physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing within primary health care.

A further important feature is to educate the community about alternatives to medications as being the first-line approach to more common and less severe mental health issues, and in turn to provide general practice with alternatives to prescriptions as support.

This in particular includes a substantial increase in use of eMental Health solutions to provide support to people as a front-line response to more common and less severe issues.

eMental health solutions also should be integrated as a fundamental part of all treatment approaches for all people with mental ill-health problems—not as a separate or entirely alternative approach.