Fact Sheet 13: What this means for e-mental health

Key issues

- E-mental health includes a range of elements. It is defined as “… that form of e-health concerned with mental health... e-mental health services provide treatment and support to people with mental health disorders through telephone, mobile phone, computer and online applications, and can range from the provision of information, peer support services, virtual applications and games, through to real-time interaction with trained clinicians.”¹

- People with lived experience of mental health difficulties, their families, and carers reported to the Commission, through the course of the Contributing lives, Thriving communities Report of the National Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services (the Review), they found seeking help online and on the phone less confronting than approaching a service provider in person.

- The growing demand for accessible, affordable, responsive and personally controlled mental health services offers an increased opportunity for e-mental health services. E-mental health can be applied across the full spectrum of mental health and ill-health – through mild, moderate and severe conditions, and incorporation in models of care including promotion, prevention, early intervention, assessment, treatment, rehabilitation and maintenance. Moving beyond a treatment-focused medical model to one that directly supports empowered and informed self-management is needed, as is inclusion of e-mental health as a part of care plans (mixing e-mental health with face to face care and support) for those with more severe illness.

- E-mental health has the potential to increase accessibility to information, especially for people in regional and remote areas, as well as allowing all Australians to access information and services, in the comfort and privacy of their own homes or other environments.

- Australia is a world leader in using information and communications technology, particularly e-mental health interventions, to improve mental health. This area presents one of the greatest opportunities to improve the efficiency and outcomes of mental health programmes and services.

- However Australia’s e-mental health system can be difficult to navigate for consumers and carers because it is not a joined-up system with shared health records, common platforms, linkages and a strong evidence base. As things stand, there is a risk of duplication and inefficiency in this area.

Key responses

- Innovative technologies can improve access to services and support, particularly for young people and those living in rural and remote areas of Australia.

- E-mental health and telehealth services have an important role to play in improving access to services and support, particularly for young people and for rural and remote communities where mental health services should be delivered in a variety of ways. These include health and other non-health portfolios, e-mental health and other phone and online services.

- Telehealth is an important consideration. Work undertaken for the Commission in the course of the Review concludes that “access to the advice of specialist mental health professionals in emergency situations, 24 hours a day, seven days a week and year round, is now possible— no matter how remotely a person might live….when specialist mental health and recovery support professionals and services cannot be present on the ground, it is now possible to provide the necessary assistance and interventions in real time via telephone or over the internet via computers, iPads and other hand-held devices.”

- The Review proposes reforms and incentives to match services to different levels of need. These included a more integrated and coordinated role for e-mental health solutions.

- The Review recommends implementing cost-effective next generation e-mental health solutions that build sustained self-help, link to biometric monitoring and provide direct clinical support strategies or enhance the effectiveness of local services. This will be achieved by:

  - Using new technologies to extend access to services.
  - Building on current Commonwealth Government investment to develop common standards and linkage platforms for all major government-supported e-mental health delivery systems.
  - Decreasing investments in first generation e-mental health type systems.
  - Investing in policy and evidence development through establishment of a relevant national policy development and technical solutions advisory body.
  - Competitive tendering of new e-mental health contracts, with a focus on provision of large-scale services.
  - Fostering intra-sectoral cooperation. Any person entering the e-mental health domain will have the opportunity to receive integrated care via relevant face-to-face health or NGO providers, or to other e-mental health providers as appropriate.

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- Requiring new contracts to use shared health records, be responsive and committed to systematic and intrinsic research and development, with particular emphasis on monitoring functional outcomes.
- Requiring new contracts to specify linking arrangements between national e-mental health services and local face-to-face mental health services, including primary health care, emergency departments, NGOs, headspace centres and multi-purpose services (MPSs) to provide continuity of care.

- The Review recommends promotion of easy access to self-help options. One way this could be achieved is by drawing on the expertise of mental health and community sectors— including e-mental health providers – to develop, disseminate and promote a suite of resources and supports for self-help and online services, and evidence of effectiveness of these supports.
  - This could include a ‘Mental Fitness Ready Reckoner’ for people, their families and other support people to explain psychological distress and mental health.
  - Distribution should be through various channels including social media, e-health and telehealth, as well as through general practices, pharmacies, community centres, Centrelink offices, schools and workplaces.

- E-mental health should be an integral component of the Australian mental health service clinical model, typically providing easy initial access to care and then continuing to support local service providers as well as ongoing clinical or self-care through appropriate monitoring and online interventions.