

2019 Submission - Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

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What are your suggestions to improve the Victorian community's understanding of mental illness and reduce stigma and discrimination?

"I think there has been a slow but continual improvement in the information available to the medical profession, allied professionals and the community through the media but the message is not getting through because the majority of people simply don't want to know and they don't care what is happening. The stigma of mental illness will remain until it is totally accepted as having the same importance as physical illness. That has never changed. I believe that even this Commission has been unintentionally influenced by the stigma associated with mental illness. The desire of the Royal Commission to allow a wide range of people to contribute to the Commission has been curtailed by excluding many people with mental illness because of the framework and process the Commission has followed. This is a form of discrimination as the Commission is not hearing from a broad enough cross section of people with mental illness. The people I feel have been excluded are those who lack the literacy, computer or educational skills to even know that the Commission is happening let alone write a submission or go online. People who are homeless don't have televisions, access to the internet, paper, pens and they can't afford newspapers or stamps. People with severe mental illness may have been hospitalised for the whole of the Commission's timeframe of operation. Groups of people like refugees, people living in poverty and Indigenous people in remote areas probably aren't even aware the Commission is happening so how can they contribute? The Commission may have tried to seek a wide input but it is still really only hearing from educated, informed, literate and well people. The choice of people chosen to speak at the open hearings clearly demonstrates this. "

What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent mental illness and to support people to get early treatment and support?

"This is my third submission as things change quickly when you have a chronic illness. For me, nothing is working well. In my experience, it is an absolute myth and a lie that there is treatment and support available when you have mental illness. If you don't have money you get nothing and have to struggle on alone as best you can or end your life."

What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent suicide?

"Nothing about suicide prevention has helped me. I just have to summon the will power to get through each day and hope that tomorrow is better. I've been suicidal many times since being injured at work and have attempted suicide several times. At first I didn't ask for help. When I did I either wasn't believed, told I was catastrophising or I was punished by hospital staff for my efforts. My GP even told me off for asking for help whenever anything went wrong. I won't ask for help again, ever. "

What makes it hard for people to experience good mental health and what can be done to improve this? This may include how people find, access and experience mental health

treatment and support and how services link with each other.

"What makes it hard is the judgement you receive from almost everyone including - very disturbingly - family and health professionals. The lack of care, the cold indifference, the cruel things people say to you, misdiagnosis, inappropriate or no treatment, lack of support or constantly changing support, the dehumanising and traumatic treatment you receive from government bodies like WorkSafe and the NDIS, the way you are treated like a liar or an unintelligent person, the way your basic human rights are constantly abused. Until people with mental illness are treated and afforded the same respect, care, expectation and quality of treatment, compassion and human rights that people with physical illness have, nothing will change or improve. Until health services and practitioners are held accountable for their cruel and inhumane treatment they will continue to re-traumatise mentally ill people, causing a further deterioration in their health and a loss of hope for any form of recovery. "

What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?

"In rural areas there is absolutely nothing. Not enough psychologists, psychiatrists, mental health workers or support programs. The treatment I received at the mental health unit in the remote rural area where I lived was one of the worst experiences of my life. It traumatised me to the point where I had a life threatening suicide attempt because of how health "professionals" treated me. I still wish I'd died because maybe then the Victorian coroner might have done something to change the situation in that city for others. As soon as I got out of hospital, I moved to a bigger city. There's more choice here but I can't access most of it because I'm: 1) old 2) female 3) not considered sick enough 4) not wealthy enough 5) not a celebrity or a sports star What can be done? 1) Adequate and serious funding for mental illness trained personnel, facilities and support programs right across the state and not just centred in Melbourne. 2) Proper accountability within the public health system. "

What are the needs of family members and carers and what can be done better to support them?

"As my family have their own busy lives, are of no support to me and have limited understanding of the effect mental illness and their lack of support is having on me, I don't really have any ideas on what can be done to support them. They have virtually cut me out of their lives since my diagnosis probably more out of lack of knowledge and not knowing how to help or what to do but the effect of that on top of dealing with my illness is devastating. "

What can be done to attract, retain and better support the mental health workforce, including peer support workers?

1) Pay them more money 2) Employ more of them so there is less burnout 3) Change the whole mental health system so the good people in the mental health workforce don't leave because they feel helpless because they think there is nothing they can do to help patients 4) Get rid of the ones that patients constantly complain about

What are the opportunities in the Victorian community for people living with mental illness to improve their social and economic participation, and what needs to be done to realise these opportunities?

"1) Treat people with mental illness as amazing human beings who just have an illness instead of pathetic, wastes of space. 2) Give them opportunities to volunteer or work part time so that they

can feel they have a reason to live and that they can continue to contribute to a better society. 3) Properly fund community mental health support organisations and services and allow them to operate how they did before the NDIS muscled in, took over and screwed everything up for people with mental illness. 4) Properly fund charities like the Salvation Army who do amazing work with mentally ill clients solely operating on donations from caring individuals. "

Thinking about what Victoria's mental health system should ideally look like, tell us what areas and reform ideas you would like the Royal Commission to prioritise for change?

"Address stigma by forcing government and public recognition that a mental illness deserves EXACTLY the same respect, treatment, care, compassion and funding that physical illness currently has. Hold government bodies like WorkSafe, the public health system and the NDIS accountable for their current inhumane and cruel practice of re-traumatising people with mental illness. "

What can be done now to prepare for changes to Victoria's mental health system and support improvements to last?

Believe what people have told you about how bad the mental health system is and multiply that by ten to account for the people you haven't heard from. Make all your time and the contributions made by all the people who spoke or wrote to you actually count for something. Hold the government accountable to not just stating their support for your recommendations but also for actually following through and enacting true and lasting changes.

Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?

"I'm sick and tired of hearing media reports about how shocked people, especially politicians are about issues surrounding mental health, especially suicide statistics. Why are they shocked? Because most people live in a little bubble where they have no idea how anyone else lives and they CHOOSE not to pay attention to what is going on in our state. Even when they hear about how others live, many people seem incapable of putting themselves in someone else's shoes. The stigma of mental illness needs to be destroyed. Mental illness, just like cancer, can happen to anyone. There's a lot of people who just don't want to get that! Why is everyone so shocked about the high rate of suicide of defence personnel? Why is it so hard to understand that someone who gave up their career and health to protect our country is then made to spend years proving to VA what happened to them and fighting to get appropriate care kills themselves because of this injustice! Or someone like me who lost my health and career because my employer failed to protect me in my workplace. Being completely traumatised and dehumanised by WorkSafe and fighting for eight years to hold my employer accountable for how they've destroyed my life - why is it a surprise that I'd want to suicide. Then doing what the media tells you - asking for help - only to be disbelieved and told I'm catastrophising by the public health system. It's time Victoria grew up and started affording people the basic human rights that people in other countries have. It's time to have compassion for others, to care and to support those who need help and not punish them further. I can say this with authority. I have two mental illnesses that require enormous energy to manage yet I can still volunteer two days a week in a shelter for homeless people because I understand how difficult their lives are and I want to let them know that I care. If I didn't fight for my rights for eight years, I'd probably be dead or at the very least homeless. "