

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?

"Publicity campaigns about how common mental illnesses are among young people and how they need understanding from the community and advice for them about where to seek help. Maybe show some people who have been understanding. For example, when our son was diagnosed with anxiety and depression we tried to conceal it from people at first fearing he would face discrimination. This meant we didn't get support from parents of our son's friends and he didn't get much support either. However, once we told people they were often quite good e.g. the manager at his part-time job, the coach of his sporting team. They were very supportive about him having time off and encouraging when he returned - they could be portrayed as mental health 'heroes'. It would be nice for family friends and school friends to support a family in mental health crisis with a casserole etc in the way they might do if it were a physical illness. While there is generally quite a lot of understanding about anxiety and depression, I know anecdotally there is less understanding of other mental health issues, such as psychosis. Here maybe the stress should be on how this can be treated, and that these people can lead normal, successful lives with the right treatment. "

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?

"Our experience is with our teenage son so our answer will focus on the importance of school services. It is important for schools to foster students' wellbeing, to have sufficient counsellors to deal with any issues that arise that can be detrimental for mental health and to have psychologists to tackle mental health issues. "

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

"There should be sufficient resources for suicide prevention services, not just Lifeline but for psychological services, such as Orygen, so that young people receive the care they need so that they do not go down the path of acting on suicidal thoughts. We were lucky - our son was seen by Orygen. Three out of four referrals are not seen. That is three out of four young people more at risk of suicide because they are not getting the level of care that they need. "

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.

"It is so important for services like the Banksia Unit at the Royal Children's Hospital to have sufficient beds for young people with acute mental health needs. Again, we were lucky we only had to wait a day for admission but we had been told it could be two weeks. There must be more funding for hospital beds for young people and adults with serious mental health conditions. The transition out of hospital could also be better managed. We were referred to Orygen at Footscray but our son saw a different person every day while he was waiting to be matched with a case

manager at Orygen Parkville. Our son left these appointments more agitated than before as he felt like he had to tell his whole story to a new person each time. Sometimes he saw mental health workers who were insufficiently qualified e.g. a nurse instead of a psychiatrist or a psychologist. Nurses are generally not sufficiently qualified to make diagnoses and their advice (e.g. in our case, it's only anxiety just push through with school etc or he will get worse) can be harmful - in our case this resulted in our son's readmission to hospital and afterwards a psychiatrist at the same establishment advised not to push him to do anything as he was in a pre-psychotic state. Be very careful about trying to save money by using nurses instead of psychologists or psychiatrists - this is not fair to our young people or anyone suffering mental health problems. In our experience, Orygen at Parkville did a fantastic job improving the mental health of our son and the Travencore School was also important for re-engaging him in education. Our son's psychologist was excellent and the Travencore teacher and helpers were very supportive, as was the family support counsellor. The problem is that Orygen can only see one out of every four referrals they receive - our son was lucky. What about the others? There needs to be more funding for more psychologists and psychiatrists at Orygen so all young people who need Orygen's services can receive the care they need. The transition out of Orygen and into Headspace could be improved. Again the problem is insufficient resources at Headspace. Although we arranged the referral and paperwork as soon as possible once we knew our son was leaving Orygen and while he had his intake interview at Headspace relatively quickly, there was an 8 week wait before he was matched with a psychologist during which time his mental health started to deteriorate again. There needs to be more funding for more psychologists at Headspace and please do not try to save money by using less qualified people. When I expressed concern about the wait, I was advised that my son should ring e-Headspace or some other helpline but he refuses to speak to people he doesn't know. He knows the best mental health help comes from a properly qualified person who is going to see him regularly. Vulnerable young people should not be waiting 8 weeks between services."

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

"Anecdotally, from my son's experience in Banksia it appears that there were quite a few young people in out of home care experiencing mental health issues. These young people need supportive families - not residential care homes. How hard would it be to have to deal with a mental health problem without the support of a family? Improve the child protection system so their own families get proper assistance with raising children and if they are incapable, due to drug abuse etc, find these children a foster family at an early age who can love and look after them. "

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

What was most important to us was receiving advice about how best to help our son recover from his mental health problems. Orygen was very good in this area. It was also important for us to be able to feed in information to Orygen about our views on our son's progress so that could be factored in in their considerations. A partnership approach between the service and the family is very important. It was also beneficial having the support of the family support counsellor.

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

"It is very important to have sufficient psychiatrists and psychologists in public hospitals and services, such as Orygen, so that they do not feel overworked and under so much stress. They

need to be paid well to keep them in the public system. These are the key people to retain - the peer support workers are not the main players - they cannot make young people better."

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?

"For school-aged young people suffering with mental health problems, schools such as Travencore, are very important for re-engaging them in education. Students at Travencore must maintain a relationship with their mainstream school and here the understanding and support of the mainstream school is important. More schools like Travencore, including in rural and regional areas, would be excellent for improving the social and economic participation of young people. "

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

"The priorities should be more beds for patients with acute mental health needs. No one should be waiting for a hospital bed. There should be more psychiatrists and psychologists to treat patients in public hospitals and in services, such as Orygen. "

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

"Support the training of psychiatrists and psychologists with scholarships contingent upon working for a certain number of years in the public system. Ensure the workforce is maintained at sufficient levels so they do not become stressed and leave. Plan to increase the number of beds in the Banksia Unit and other public hospitals as an urgent priority so patients who need in-hospital treatment are not waiting. If you really want to stop the murder of young women on the streets or in parks, ensure that every person who needs mental health treatment in a hospital can get it. Provide Orygen with the resources to see all the young people who are referred instead of just one in four. Calculate how many mental health professionals would be needed and plan accordingly."

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

"People with mental health issues are already suffering. They should not be made to wait for a bed in a hospital, be rejected by a service like Orygen due to lack of resources or wait for weeks or months between services. The Royal Commission must recommend providing sufficient funding for hospital beds, psychiatrists and psychologists so that all Victorians, including those in rural and regional areas, receive the mental health care that they need. "