

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

Organisation Name

N/A

Name

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

"Use existing evidence-based programs to better educate the community on the signs and symptoms of mental illness, to reduce stigma, increase appropriate help-seeking and prevent suicide. Mental Health First Aid Training is the most evaluated and effective mental health education program in the world and it was developed by Victorians. "

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?

"In my role as a researcher working in population mental health, I developed a program called ""teen Mental Health First Aid"" (<https://mhfa.com.au/cms/teen-mhfa-course-information>). This is a 3x 75 minute session that is being rolled out nationally. Mental Health First Aid Australia trains suitably experienced adults to become tMHFA 'Instructors' who then provide the program within schools during regular class time. Some Instructors are employed within schools in a school nurse, counselling or welfare role. Other schools outsource the Instructors through an independent contractor agreement. This program was developed based on years of research into effective mental health literacy education and the bespoke needs of adolescents in prompting appropriate help seeking, reducing stigmatising attitudes and reducing suicide risk. The program has been through three very large randomised controlled trials here in Victoria and found to be safe and effective (<https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/research-groups/centre-for-mental-health/population-mental-health/teen-mental-health-first-aid-training>). This program was created in Victoria in partnership with experts in mental health, students, teachers and people with lived experience of mental illness as adolescents. It has been very carefully and specifically designed to increase help seeking among adolescents and improve peer support when a teen is experiencing a mental health problem such as depression, or a mental health crisis such as suicidal thoughts or self-injury. Because Mental Health First Aid Australia has an extensive Instructor network and training model, this program has now been delivered to more than 60,000 students across Australia and has been licensed to MHFA USA (where the support of Lady Gaga and her Born This Way Foundation has created huge media coverage: <https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/lady-gaga-championing-australian-mental-health-first-aid-in-us/11225848>). It has also been licensed in the UK, Canada, Ireland and UAE. It is the most evaluated and evidence-based mental health training program for students in Years 10-12 that effectively increases quality first aid intentions towards peers with mental health problems. Implementation of this program in the school setting requires that parents and teachers first be trained in the adult version, called Youth Mental Health First Aid (<https://mhfa.com.au/cms/youth-course-information>). The training of adults and students across a whole school community acts to reduce stigma, increase mental health literacy and better support students and teachers experiencing mental health problems. Local Government Areas have been so impressed with this model that a number of councils have funded roll out of the teen and youth programs across their entire catchment areas, including Monash

(<https://www.monash.vic.gov.au/About-Us/News/Five-Monash-projects-funded-under-Pick-My-Project>) Macedon Ranges/Glenelg/Benalla (<http://www.live4life.org.au/about-us/>) and Moonee Valley (<https://valleyyouth.mvcc.vic.gov.au/Whats-on/Programs/Thriving-Minds>) The State of Victoria could make this program mandatory for adolescents and secondary school teachers to increase mental health literacy, prompt early and appropriate help seeking among young people with mental health problems and to reduce suicide risk. However, when young people seek help, they need to access appropriately qualified professionals quickly and easily. This means that in addition to providing funding for this evidence-based and effective program, we need to also ensure mental health services are better integrated within schools, such as funding appropriate numbers of school psychologists for every secondary school, along with expanding the GPs in schools program (and ensuring those GPs have specialist skills in adolescent mental health)."

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

"We know that the teen MHFA program reduces a number of risks for youth suicide by increasing social support and skills in intervening and supporting a friend with suicidal thoughts or intent. However, we have not yet been able to find funding to be able to monitor health systems and coronial databases to evaluate whether the implementation of the program does lead to the hard outcomes on suicide prevention that we know it should. The State of Victoria could pioneer youth suicide prevention by granting research funding to allow the state-wide roll out of teen and youth mental health first aid training, while also gathering data on suicide attempts and deaths, to finally provide evidence on the suicide prevention impact we know is likely to be happening but do not have the funding to be able to examine. Having screening services embedded in schools that examine for risk of suicide, depression, anxiety, disordered eating and body dissatisfaction, and substance misuse would provide the most valuable data on picking up students who are at-risk and need further support. Having screening measures in the latter primary school years during the transition to puberty, and again during the transition to secondary school and the difficult year 9-10 transition years, would assist in preventing suicide and making sure children who require more mental health support are identified and provided the services 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.

"Good parenting has been called the 'clean water' of mental health. Good parents and the scaffolding, safety, nutrition and nurture they provide is a key to preventing many common and disabling mental illnesses. Maternity Services provide birthing classes to expecting parents and then Maternal and Child Health services provide basic education on safety, sleep and nutrition. However, parents are not routinely provided with evidence-based parenting programs that would teach them appropriate behaviour management skills, how to set limits on screen time and routines of daily living (ensuring healthy diet and adequate physical activity is achieved), or help teach children about emotion regulation. The State of Victoria could provide free parenting education at key transition points during a child's life. During the maternal and child health nurse education sessions (extend from 4-sessions to at least 10 and include information on maternal body image and healthy role modelling, adjustment, postnatal depression and infant attachment), during the transition to 3-year old kinder (with programs like Triple-P or Tuning into Kids, which are heavily evaluated, evidence-based and effective), during the transition to primary school (with programs like Confident Body, Confident Child) and the transition to secondary school (with

programs like Youth Mental Health First Aid). "

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

"Social inequality drives poor mental health as well as poor parenting. Providing access to high-quality schooling, health services and safe neighbourhoods are incredibly important for good mental health. The public health communications about obesity are harming our children, driving poor body image, anxiety about food, disordered eating, binge eating and avoidance of exercise. We need health programs in schools that are designed by mental health experts that include a psychological understanding of how and why we eat and enjoy exercise. This will help drive good mental health and coping patterns in schools. Adequately training parents, teachers and health professionals in how to recognise and respond to mental health problems in children and young people (through evidence-based programs such as Mental Health First Aid) are a way of ensuring early intervention can be achieved. Screening programs for children and parents are key to ensuring that no-one slips through the gaps. Importantly, adequately funding mental health research so that we can find which interventions have the most preventive effect with the least economic cost is essential to implementation of drivers of change."

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

Better training programs that are evidence-based and effective. Access to high-quality family therapy services. Disability insurance scheme that adequately covers costs for seeking support for mental health.

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

"Better funding of the mental health system so that individuals working within the system are not carrying such high caseloads, such extremely high forensic and suicide risk and burn out within years of entering the health system. Emergency mental health systems need to be separated from emergency physical health systems, or better integrated and adequately funded rather than left to understaffed and undertrained Emergency Departments which are designed to treat physical trauma and illness."

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?

"This will depend on the individual, their illness, its chronicity and severity, an individual's age gender and other cultural identities. I think it is very hard to provide all individuals living with mental illness the same type of support and expect the same outcome. Supports for individuals living with mental illness need to be tailored to their needs."

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?

"I would like to see an increased focus on prevention. I would like to see mental illness prevention given the same amount of funding and communication support that public health campaigns for cancer prevention (especially skin cancer), reducing the road toll, tobacco cessation and

vaccination, which have all had a successful positive impact on the health outcomes of Victorians."

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

"I would like to see all elements of the mental health system from research and prevention to tertiary care and emergency management, to chronic illness and supportive housing to be better funded and supported by staff with high quality training and education. "

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

"I am a population mental health researcher. I work with the University of Melbourne and La Trobe University. I have a PhD in psychology, but my expertise is in creating programs for the public that increase mental health literacy, prevent suicide, prevent eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in parents and children, and improve appropriate help seeking for mental health problems. I have lived experience of a mental illness and am a parent and female academic. I collaborate with Mental Health First Aid Australia, Mental Health First Aid USA, Eating Disorders Victoria, Centre for Excellence in Eating Disorders, the Victorian Eating Disorders Research Network, the Alliance for the Prevention of Mental Disorders and Australian Rotary Health. Some of my work can be found on the following websites: <https://www.confidentbody.net/>
<https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/research-groups/centre-for-mental-health/population-mental-health/teen-aid-trial> <https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/research-groups/centre-for-mental-health/population-mental-health/teen-mental-health-first-aid-training>
<https://scholars.latrobe.edu.au/display/lhart> "