

MEDIA RELEASE, 14 October 2020

Calls for better integration of allied health solutions to prevent increase in chronic conditions, as hundreds likely to suffer long-term effects of COVID-19

- *Allied health professionals need to stand alongside doctors and nurses to help prevent a blow out of chronic health conditions already costing Australia more than \$27 billion each year.*
- *Data from COVID-19 studies show as many as 10-15 per cent those who have had the virus show lingering effects needing rehabilitation and mental health issues in the community have also doubled.*
- *Key allied health services are often underutilised, with barriers to uptake including lack of integration in the healthcare system, and lack of Medicare rebates – lower uptakes of private health insurance will exacerbate.*
- *Case study: Online art therapy classes for new mums experiencing poor mental health demonstrates value of interdisciplinary care.*

University health experts are calling for better recognition of allied health professionals to aid the nation's post-COVID-19 economic and social recovery, with research showing hundreds of Australians could be affected by chronic health problems caused by the virus itself, or from poor mental health due to lock-downs and rising unemployment levels.

Allied health (which includes clinical psychologists and mental health workers, social workers, occupational therapists, rehabilitation professionals, physiotherapists, art therapists and exercise physiologists) currently represents more than 25 per cent of the Australian healthcare workforce, although it is often sidelined within the current healthcare system.

Experts believe allied health services have a role to play in getting people back on their feet sooner.

Professor Esther May from the Australian Council of Deans for Health Sciences said traditional healthcare approaches in Australia focused on short-term or one-off treatments, not a holistic healthcare model aimed at actively encouraging wellness to prevent issues becoming more persistent, or chronic in the future.

“Allied health is one of the three pillars of healthcare, along with medicine and nursing, and yet it is too often underutilised.

“Going forward we need to allow more people to access the full range of allied health services and community programs that can aid recovery across all sectors of society, as well as continuing research into cutting-edge prevention and rehabilitation therapies, and new modes of delivery.”

Data from the international COVID Symptom Study, which used an app into which millions of people in the United States, United Kingdom, and Sweden tapped their symptoms, suggest 10 to 15 percent of people don't recover quickly, a possible risk factor for an increase of chronic disease in the future.

“An estimated 80 per cent of the burden of disease and injury suffered by Australians is already attributable to chronic conditions, COVID-19 is likely to make that much worse.

“Diseases like mental illness, chronic fatigue, obesity, and respiratory disorders will have significant long-term economic impacts if attention isn't given to preventative health and rehabilitation.

Professor May said an integrated healthcare system that included therapies other than just GP or hospital visits should be viewed as an investment in the future.

However, barriers to allied health access remained with a complex Medicare rebate system and additional out-of-pocket expenses that prevented adequate uptake of services. In the pandemic environment, a reduction in private health insurance cover could also exacerbate this.

Research: Chronic health issues already cost Australia billions.

Several research reports have highlighted the costs of avoiding allied health services, with medical treatment of chronic illness **costing the community around \$27 billion dollars each year according to a 2017 report by La Trobe University's Department of Public Health**. Preventative health spending was minimal at just 1.34 percent of all healthcare spending.

“We know getting the mix wrong is a burden to the healthcare system with the Grattan Institute finding ineffective management of chronic disease costs Australia \$320 million each year largely due to failures in how we roll out primary health delivery in the community.

“COVID-19 presents us with a chance to rethink how we deliver services and to finally put the role of various allied health professionals alongside doctors and nurses in helping recovery efforts for specific conditions, with a focus on rehabilitation, preventative health, getting people back to work, and promoting wellness across a lifetime.”

We need to learn from what is being done in other countries including at specialist COVID-19 community clinics in the UK which integrate allied health professions with medical specialists to help people manage their physical and mental recovery.

Demand for qualified allied health graduates is now exceeding supply with Australia facing a skills shortage in 2021, especially in rural and regional areas. Government research prior to the pandemic showed Healthcare and Social Assistance positions were most in demand in the Department of Education, Skills and Employment 'Jobs Outlook' report.

CASE STUDY INTERVIEWS --Online mindful art for new parents helping mental health:

A hospital based community out-patient art therapy group is running online each week in Melbourne for new parents experiencing a range of mental health issues in support of mental health recovery, parenthood and to cope with the confines of COVID-19. Evidence has located a range of key areas of function for this modality as part of a broader prevention and recovery treatment plan. **Art therapist Ange Morgan** from La Trobe University has been working in this specialist allied health area for more than 10 years across a range of focus areas including general adult mental health in patient units as well as in community settings such as homelessness and family violence services and in schools, to support recovery and prevent longer term health issues.

ENDS

Allied Health Professions Day will be held on Wednesday 14 October #proudtobeAHP #strongertogether

MEDIA AND INTERVIEWS for Prof Esther May and Ange Morgan.

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