



MEDIA RELEASE

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Allied health workers in short supply as mental health issues soar post-COVID

Experts are warning an acute shortage of allied health graduates is creating pressure on the health system as providers scramble to address a spike in demand for mental health services as well as therapies to support those in the aged and disability sectors.

Allied health, which includes clinical psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, and rehabilitation professionals, currently represents more than 25 per cent of the Australian healthcare workforce. However, demand is now exceeding supply with Australia facing a severe skills shortage, especially in rural and regional areas.

With the Productivity Commission's report into mental health expected to be released in October, a survey in the Medical Journal of Australia in June 2020 (<https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2020/mental-health-people-australia-first-month-covid-19-restrictions-national-survey>) has shown mental health problems in Australia are now at least twice as prevalent as in non-pandemic circumstances.

Disruptions to graduate pipeline

The **Australian Council of Deans of Health Sciences (ACDHS)**, the peak representative organisation for Australian universities responsible for the pre-clinical education and training of allied health practitioners, says disruptions to clinical placement programs for final year allied health students this year had created problems in meeting future demand.

Professor Esther May, ACDHS Chair and Dean of Health Sciences at UniSA, said the impact of lock-downs and access to clinical training in both public and private health services had placed pressure on final year students progressing to graduation, and this would impact the supply of work-ready graduates in 2021.

“Waitlists are growing rapidly as more people are needing assistance from trained mental health professionals and counsellors.

“Universities are working hard to ensure that they deliver job-ready graduates, with most also encouraging rural and regional study placements to ensure a pipeline of qualified allied health professionals in areas that are experiencing acute shortages of trained staff.

“Access to allied health services in primary care is often impacted by the long wait time for public services, and out-of-pocket expenses for many private allied health providers. We need to avoid the escalating number of acute cases turning up in our hospital emergency departments by funding more community care strategies.”

Grim picture of mental health requirements post-COVID

“We are simply not prepared for the extreme surge in care requirements, with statistics already painting a grim picture in terms of community wellbeing and higher rates of anxiety and depression due to uncertainty around employment, financial pressures, and inadequate access to health services,” Professor May said.

“Aged care, disability, community and rehabilitation services need trained professionals as thousands of people who put off treatment earlier in the year are now looking to re-engage. Many not-for-profit agencies are already finding it difficult to access qualified staff for clients.”

Need to strengthen community-based healthcare models

In June the ACDHS sent a submission to the Senate Inquiry into COVID-19 (<https://bit.ly/2RM69k>) calling for a strengthening in the capacity of community-based healthcare to foster better health and wellbeing in individuals, and to help people re-engage in their daily activities and occupations.

The organisation has called for a holistic health strategy to address the sudden increase in demand for services post-pandemic.

“We need to harness the skills of allied health practitioners to work alongside the medical and nursing professionals to properly support the community in a recovery from the pandemic,” Professor May said.

“That means we must be innovative in the way we train students, but we must also do more to help community members to access services which can improve wellbeing outcomes and get people back on their feet.

“There is an urgent need for appropriate funding to boost research into effective treatments for things like anxiety and depression and for programs that can be rolled out quickly and cost effectively to help those in need.”

Mental Health Day in Australia will be held on October 10, 2020.

Case study for interview. Yoga trials for anxiety and depression.

Research into community yoga therapy with allied health professionals

Professor May said ACDHS members including Uni SA and Western Sydney University were now spearheading research into evidence-based programs that could move the dial on mental health outcomes.

This included new movement-based yoga programs to improve mood that could be used by practitioners in community-based settings and telehealth counselling sessions targeting vulnerable communities in rural and regional areas.

Clinical trials are currently underway in Adelaide at Uni SA.

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