



Senator Rachel Siewert  
Committee Chair  
Senate Committee on Community Affairs  
PO Box 6100, Parliament House  
Canberra, ACT, 2600  
[community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au)

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Dear Senator,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the Senate Committee on Community Affairs Inquiry into the accessibility and quality of mental health services in rural and remote Australia.

Deakin University believes that through the examination of the accessibility and quality of mental health services in rural and remote Australia, this Inquiry is addressing a particularly important issue for our nation.

By advancing the understanding of the delivery and effectiveness of mental health treatments and services, as well as the community's access and attitudes towards them, current policy can be refined and funding for research and development in the sector can be increased, with the long-term goal of minimising mental health burden for Australians in regional and remote areas.

Deakin University's extensive network of health partners, considerable research in the sector, and community engagement throughout a considerable portion of regional and outer metropolitan Victoria, means the University is well placed to advise the committee on the development of Australians located in regional, rural and remote areas.

I commend this submission to the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Professor Jane den Hollander AO  
**Vice-Chancellor**



## **Deakin University**

### **Submission**

## **Inquiry into the accessibility and quality of mental health services in rural and remote Australia.**

### **PREAMBLE**

Deakin University is pleased to contribute to the Standing Senate Committee on Community Affairs Inquiry into the accessibility and quality of mental health services in rural and remote Australia. The University has a vested interest in this subject given its regional location, ongoing research in the sector, affiliated regional and rural health partners, and community engagement throughout regional and outer metropolitan Victoria.

Matters such as the accessibility, delivery and efficacy of mental health treatments and services, and community attitudes towards them, are important factors when considering the needs of Australians in regional, rural and remote areas. Resources and frameworks currently exist to help improve on these matters in this setting; however, there is a need to build capacity.

Capacity building necessitates the employment of an overarching best-practice framework that supports innovation, industry partnerships, treatment discovery, development and translation. Acquiring health partners that occupy regional, rural and remote areas is an essential consideration in helping to solve health needs for Australians located in regional, rural and remote areas. We need regional and rural solutions for regional and rural problems.

Regionally placed teams with strong track records, such as Deakin's Centre for Innovation in Mental and Physical Health and Clinical Treatment (IMPACT) in partnership with Barwon Health, are poised to take advantage of the opportunities, to lead the field in developing and translating new, effective therapeutic interventions and apply novel methods of service delivery. For effective change in these areas, research is essential; and good research requires ample funding support.

Deakin University stresses the importance of appropriate regional, rural and remote partnerships, and increased funding support for research and innovation in treating mental health issues, to ensure the greatest return on the wellbeing of Australians located in rural and remote areas.

## DEAKIN UNIVERSITY'S RESPONSES TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

### **a) the nature and underlying causes of rural and remote Australians accessing mental health services at a much lower rate**

Over a quarter of Australians live in areas classified as regional or remote. Although risk factors for mental health concerns for regional and remote Australians are similar to the rest of the nation, rates of access to mental health related services for this group are substantially lower. According to data from the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare on the mental health workforce, less than 12 per cent of psychiatrists, 18 per cent of psychologists and 24 per cent of mental health nurses are employed outside major cities. While additional research will improve our understanding of this problem, it seems that this issue is, at least in part, systemic in nature. A universal strategy that focuses on capacity building, service reach and accessibility, and the delivery of more effective treatments must be adopted to help remedy this.

### **b) the higher rate of suicide in rural and remote Australia**

According to past reports from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, suicide rates of regional and remote Australians are, on average, double that of their metropolitan counterparts. While outreach programs play an important role in suicide prevention, to curb rates of suicide in rural and remote Australia long-term we must develop and deliver more effective treatments and interventions, psychological and pharmacological, for the severe mental health conditions commonly associated with suicide. Investment in treatment development and deployment in combination with service provision reform will potentially have the greatest impact on rates of suicide nationwide in the long-term. Accessibility of treatment remains a principal element of suicide risk reduction.

### **c) the nature of the mental health workforce**

The current problem with the mental health workforce is largely systemic in nature. Historically patchwork allocation of mental health funding linked to inadequate funding support for research and development has slowed treatment innovation and program development. This affects the delivery of mental health services in the long-term. In the research domain, low job security and short-term contracts of employment compromise the sector.

### **d) the challenges of delivering mental health services in the regions**

The challenges associated with access to and delivery of mental health services to people in regional and remote Australia are an important line of inquiry. These services must be tailored to the needs of this group, to ensure they are beneficial and that communities they target are receptive of them. A greater focus on developing regional and remote partnerships to foster delivery is needed.

### **e) attitudes towards mental health services**

Ongoing initiatives such as Mental Health Week, World Bipolar Day and R U Ok Day are helping to combat the stigma associated with mental health issues, as well as raise awareness of currently available services. However, the collective perception of mental health services with respect to accessibility seems to be negative. Mental health services are perceived as unaffordable and difficult to access. A reputation shift will come via the delivery of effective and affordable services and treatments. Securing health partners that occupy regional, rural and remote areas and the development of representative community advisory groups will be crucial in facilitating the improvements highlighted by this inquiry. Additional funding is required to support design, delivery and staffing these services.

### **f) opportunities that technology presents for improved service delivery**

Innovative approaches are needed to improve delivery of mental health services in regional and remote areas. Telehealth, telemedicine, internet applications and similar approaches can help to fill some of these gaps in the absence of face-to-face options for those with access to internet/phone services.

While investment in such approaches will certainly help move the sector forward, it is integral that these services are empirically designed and appraised prior to their roll out.

Specifically relating to mental health, in 2017 the Federal Budget afforded one of the smallest investments in the sector in the last five years. It is crucial that government invests in appropriate research to support the improvement of mental health services in regional and remote Australia. Researchers at Deakin University's IMPACT Strategic Research Centre recently completed a trial investigating the delivery of 'MAPS' - an established psychoeducation program with demonstrated efficacy – via a web-based platform ('MoodSwings') and are currently working on setting up an adapted version of the MAPS program, incorporating a smartphone app ('MyMAPS'). Much of this promising research, while based in regional Australia, has relied on external funding sources from the United States National Institute of Mental Health – NIMH, and local non-government funding bodies.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Deakin University makes three recommendations for the Senate Committee on Community Affairs:

- Design an integrated strategy that supports research and development, translation to the clinic, and efficient access to effective service provision to improve the quality of mental health services for Australians located in rural and remote areas.
- Encourage partnership with health partners that occupy regional, rural and remote areas, and the development of a standing network or taskforce to accurately identify the evolving needs of these Australians, and ensure a unified strategy is employed.
- Propose significant increases in government funding support for research in the sector, committing to a long-term strategy supporting bench-to-bedside research in the bush.