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**MENTAL HEALTH OUR FASTEST-GROWING HOSPITAL  
 ADMISSION**

*Australia’s mental health system is struggling even before the demands from  
 COVID-19 are felt, warns AMA*

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) has warned that despite additional investment in the last Budget, chronic underfunding of existing frontline services and a lack of psychiatrists is besetting a mental health sector struggling to cope in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The AMA has told the House Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Australia’s mental health system is suffering from underfunding at all sector and government levels, and services are not coping with demand, even before the impact of COVID-19 is felt.

Calling for more investment into mental health care, AMA President Dr Omar Khorshid said that although extra funding in the last Budget was welcome, the providers of existing mental health services received no additional support despite overwhelming demand.

The situation in public mental health is even more dire, landing more people with severe mental health conditions in already over-stretched hospital emergency departments.

“There are not enough psychiatrists in Australia and there is likely to be increased demand for their services generated by the pandemic. We urgently need an alternative to emergency departments treating people experiencing acute mental ill-health.

“We know that mental health admissions to hospitals are the fastest growing of any hospital admission, increasing at an average rate of 4.8 per cent each year from 2013-14 and the five following years, so that’s a total growth of 26.4 per cent over five years from 2013, accounting for an extra 6,073 admissions each year or a total of 30,366 for that period.

“People with mental health conditions are also staying longer in hospital - up to twice as long as people with heart conditions, for example, according to data from AIHW.

“Australia also has a serious shortage of child and adolescent child psychiatrists and we need a serious commitment to grow this cohort of the mental health workforce to support early detection.

“The May budget allocated \$11 million for 30 new psychiatry training places and while this is welcome, it is woefully inadequate in the face of current and future needs. We’d need at least 260 by the year 2025.

“And we need to understand there is very high demand for mental health services in regional and rural areas and getting the workforce into these places requires urgent attention,” Dr Khorshid said.

Appearing alongside Dr Khorshid, AMA NSW President Dr Danielle McMullen said optimal mental health care is patient-centred, and General Practice has an essential role in responding to and coordinating treatment and care for people experiencing mental ill-health.

“GPs are frequently the first point of contact on someone’s mental health journey and they need to be resourced to provide appropriate care and treatment pathways.

“We know investment in well-designed, medically governed health teams result in better health outcomes and General Practice can oversee stronger coordination of things like older persons’ mental health, mental health nurses, psychologists, paediatricians, counsellors and drug, alcohol and gambling support. These supports are all key aspects of a patient-centred mental health system,” Dr McMullen said.

The AMA’s submission to the House Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention can be read here:

<https://www.ama.com.au/articles/submission-select-committee-mental-health-and-suicide-prevention>

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6 August 2021

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