

TRANSCRIPT

Friday, 6 December 2024

Transcript: AMA President, Dr Danielle McMullen, Press Conference, Parliament House

Subject: Greater investment in mental healthcare needed

DR DANIELLE McMULLEN: I'm Dr Danielle McMullen, President of the Australian Medical Association, and I'm here today to talk about our position statement on mental health and wellbeing.

Most Australians will be affected by mental illness. Nearly half of us, it will be our own mental illness, and for the rest of us, we're likely to be affected by the illness of a friend, a colleague, or a loved one. And yet, navigating our mental health system is nearly impossible, and we're leaving our most vulnerable patients falling through the cracks.

It is time for us to stop working in silos and for all levels of government and the NGO sector to work together to build a mental health system that meets the need of our patients. General practice is the front line of our mental health system, and where most patients will turn to for their first bit of care. Mental illness is now the most common reason that patients come into general practice clinics like mine and seek help and support.

It is essential that we support general practice to deliver longer consultations and to remove the disincentive that's there in Medicare. Medicare currently pays less for a mental health consultation than it does for a physical health consultation, and that just doesn't make sense.

For the patients who need more care, there is such a shortage of psychiatry workforce that the waiting times are unacceptable. We need to train more psychiatrists, we need to work together more collaboratively so that people can get that specialist care when they need it. And we're also seeing that across our private and public mental health units that shortages in workforce, closure of beds despite increasing demand, and chronic underinvestment are leading to the longest wait times on record for an admitted mental health bed.

As we can see across all aspects of our mental health system, there is strain, there is chronic underinvestment, and it is patients who are bearing the brunt of that. We need to work together across all arms of government, across the NGO sector, with our consumers and patients, and with our doctors and other healthcare workers to design a system that works for Australians who need mental healthcare.

We need to collaborate and co-ordinate. We need to invest in collecting the necessary data and research to show that programs actually work, and that we're investing money into systems that improve the mental health of Australians.

In closing, the last message is that if you are struggling with your mental health, it is really important to know that we are still here as doctors. We're ready and waiting to help, but we need help too and that's what we're calling for today.

QUESTION: The health ministers are meeting today. What would your message be to Australia's health ministers?

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DR DANIELLE McMULLEN: The health ministers have a big agenda. There's lots to cover in terms of improving our health system as a whole, but they can't afford to forget the most vulnerable in our community and those who are struggling with mental illness, and I really implore upon them to invest in mental health and make some strong recommendations about how we're going to improve the mental health sector.

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