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## **MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH AS AUSTRALIA EMERGES FROM THE COVID-19 THREAT**

The AMA is calling for a renewed and expanded focus on the mental health of the population as Australia begins to emerge from the health and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, said that the community will need more resources to deal with the widespread impact that the COVID-19 virus and the strong physical distancing measures have had on individuals throughout the crisis.

“The unprecedented nature of the pandemic and the control measures have affected people in different ways – from anxiety and uncertainty to more serious issues that involve people moving into the formal mental health system,” Dr Bartone said.

“Everybody has felt some level of worry and concern, but some people much more than others.

“For some people, it will take some time to get over the trauma of this pandemic. We must be ready with the expert mental health care and resources to help people get back to a position of normality in their everyday lives.

“Some will require specialised mental health care for existing or new conditions, while many will receive more appropriate care and advice from their GP.

“It is normal to have anxieties and concerns in these extraordinary circumstances. Your GP can help you cope and steer you through this period,” Dr Bartone said.

The AMA believes there are certain groups in the community who may be suffering more acute mental health issues. These include:

- people with pre-existing mental illnesses;
- those encountering higher levels of stress and uncertainty (including the recently unemployed or under-employed, and those with less stable or secure housing);
- frontline and essential workers, including health workers;
- the vulnerable and socially isolated, including those with severe mental illness;
- the elderly, both in the community and in aged care facilities; and
- children and young people.

Dr Bartone said that the AMA is concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on people’s mental health and wellbeing across the age range, and whether the mental health sector is equipped to cater for anticipated increased demand for services.

“Due to decades of under-resourcing and under-staffing, public mental healthcare services were struggling to deliver accessible and high-quality care before the COVID-19 crisis,” Dr Bartone said.

“But dedicated public mental healthcare services and practitioners have continued to provide the best care they can, within these constraints, during the crisis.

“Private mental health services were providing high quality services to enhance care for persons with severe mental health services, and have continued to do so during the COVID-19 crisis.

“As we will continue to encounter the medium and long-term social and economic disruptions caused by the pandemic, pressure on all mental health service providers will grow.

“Many health professionals, including GPs, psychiatrists, and emergency physicians are seeing significant growth in the number of patients seeking treatment and support for their mental health.”

### **AMA Priorities for Mental Health in COVID-19 Recovery and Beyond:**

- Alternatives to Emergency Department presentations, and active deployment of hospital in the home alternatives to acute hospital admission.
- Public mental health services (hospital, acute and community sectors) must have enhanced resourcing and staffing to provide care for the increased mental healthcare demands of the COVID-19 public health crisis.
- Acute hospital, rehabilitation, and long-term bed capacity must be expanded and commensurately staffed to address bed block from increased emergency department mental health presentations.
- Community mental health services must also be expanded and commensurately staffed to provide comprehensive care.
- Rapid development of metropolitan and rural outreach telehealth resources (videoconferencing) and administrative support specifically for mental health consultations, which is currently lagging in public mental health services.
- There must be collaborative arrangements between public and private psychiatric hospitals and services analogous to the COVID-19 arrangements for public and private general hospital services.
- As social distancing measures and travel restrictions are likely to continue, the ongoing extension of the COVID-19 telehealth provisions to metropolitan areas is necessary to provide more accessible, high-quality mental health care across private and public sectors.
- Ongoing telehealth provision and deployment of new digital health services, and the related infrastructure, is particularly needed in rural and regional areas, and disadvantaged communities.
- Specific, adequately resourced and staffed mental health support and care is essential for all healthcare workers (doctors, nurses, allied health) across public and private sectors working during the COVID-19 crisis, including the frontline of COVID-19, general medical/surgical services, and mental healthcare professionals.

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