

6 March 2020

The Hon Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health
Department of Health
GPO Box 9848
Canberra ACT 2601

By email to: Minister.Hunt@health.gov.au

Dear Minister Hunt

Re: Telehealth mental health response to COVID-19 outbreak

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) is committed to contributing to medical efforts in Australia, New Zealand and globally to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). In Australia, in addition to our members keeping abreast of, and following, the latest guidelines provided by relevant authorities for their patients, they have also been supporting the community by managing the growing levels of distress and anxiety associated with the virus pandemic, at both individual and collective levels [1].

The RANZCP commends the Australian government's assertive response to COVID-19. Despite these efforts to control the spread of COVID-19, we recognise that it is likely to be necessary to implement continued and additional innovative response measures to mitigate further transmission within and into Australia.

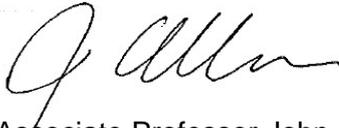
A practical clinical measure we wish to recommend for your urgent consideration is the enabling of psychiatric services to be delivered by telehealth, where needed, in major cities. Extending *Medicare-subsidised telehealth consultations* to urban areas would immediately help to safeguard the health and well-being of people with existing and new onset mental illness and would assist in mitigating concerns that psychiatrists across Australia are raising, including:

- Heightened anxiety due to media reporting, and psychological impacts of public health measures to contain COVID-19, are exacerbating pre-existing anxiety and other mental health conditions, leading to increases in distress, symptoms and relapse rates.
- The many people with mental ill health who also have and are subject to physical illnesses which render them particularly vulnerable to the virus and thus at further risk in attending appointments in shared spaces.
- The impact of quarantine orders, whereby persons with mental illness may not be able to attend their regular psychiatric appointments, and psychiatrists may be unable to attend their workplace, causing significant access and availability issues.
- The need for increased access to mental health services for frontline health care workers given the additional stress and anxiety that would be placed on this population [2].

RANZCP members are indicating their strong support and willingness to ensure uninterrupted access to psychiatry services and minimise harm caused by increased distress and isolation of vulnerable members of the community. The RANZCP acknowledges that mental health service provision is broader than psychiatry and suggests that similar measures could be considered in respect of other medical and clinical providers.

I look forward to hearing from you regarding the practical telehealth measure proposed and can be contacted via Rosie Forster, Executive Manager, Practice, Policy and Partnerships Department via rosie.forster@ranzcp.org or by phone on (03) 9601 4943. I also wish to assure that the RANZCP is available to assist in every way in a comprehensive and collaborative mental health response to COVID-19.

Yours sincerely



Associate Professor John Allan
President

Ref: 1718

Cc: Professor Brendan Murphy, Chief Medical Officer

References

1. Williams, B. Mental Health Concerns Arise Amid COVID-19 Epidemic. Psychiatry Advisor. 2020 Feb 26. Accessed at: <https://www.psychiatryadvisor.com/home/topics/general-psychiatry/mental-health-concerns-arise-amid-covid-19-epidemic/>
2. Xiang YT, Yang Y, Li W, Zhang L, Zhang Q, Cheung T, Ng CH. Timely mental health care for the 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak is urgently needed. The Lancet Psychiatry. 2020 Feb 4.