3 December 2020

Ms Christine Morgan
Prime Minister’s National Suicide Prevention Adviser

By email to: SP.Taskforce@health.gov.au

Dear Ms Morgan

Re: Interim Advice to the Prime Minister

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) recognises the extensive work and consideration that has been undertaken to produce the interim advice to the Prime Minister. We commend the comprehensive, compassionate, whole-of-government approach that is recommended and are hopeful that this work can generate positive changes in our society.

The RANZCP is committed to supporting people in suicidal distress and working with governments and communities to prevent suicides, and appreciate that the Expert Advisory Group includes psychiatry representation.

We agree with your call for collective action, beyond the health sector. As members of a profession that is facing critical workforce shortages, we welcome the prioritisation of workforce development, including the recommended whole-of-government workforce strategy for suicide prevention.

It has been a priority for me during my term as President to harness the experience and expertise on suicide prevention within the membership of the College. To this end, I have formed an Advisory Group on Suicide, which is developing an evidence-based policy position to guide both clinical and policy approaches in suicide prevention. This is soon to be available in the form of a position statement. The RANZCP is also focussing on enhancements to our education and training in suicide prevention and to the provision of support for psychiatrists and trainees who experience the tragedy of suicide through their work.

Psychiatrists work hard to understand and support people who are experiencing mental illness and distress through a compassionate and non-judgemental therapeutic relationship. As mental health specialists, psychiatrists offer evidence-based clinical assessment, diagnosis and care, ensuring each person receives the support and treatment that is right for them. Psychiatrists’ ability to provide high-quality care and support is dependent on the adequate resourcing and provision of community mental health services.

We know that the best outcomes are achieved from working in partnership with other mental health professionals, families, and those with lived experience, in a collaborative, all-of-community approach to suicide prevention. The growing practice of incorporating people with
lived experience as service co-designers and support providers will bring further innovations and positive impacts to suicide prevention, and the interim advice is an encouraging example of this.

The RANZCP takes the opportunity of this consultation to highlight that the role of mental illness and the importance of clinical mental health service delivery is not fully explored in the interim advice. We would urge that the final advice incorporates recommendations to improve access to affordable and effective clinical mental health services, with consideration to funding, training, auditing of service quality, scalability of services and research. Any new developments in suicide prevention, including those involving non-health portfolios, should aim to enhance existing mental health services, be guided by a public health approach that recognises the important role of psychiatric inpatient services, and comply with the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards. The standard on Partnering with Consumers could assist with benchmarking and guiding the inclusion of lived experience expertise at all levels of policy, service planning, and delivery.

The RANZCP highlights that there is a need for rapid, readily accessible data on mental health and suicides and the establishment of clinical registries that would provide the potential to improve our understanding of the factors that contribute to quality care.

The current focus on mental health and suicide prevention through the Suicide Prevention Taskforce, the National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan, the National Suicide Prevention Implementation Strategy for the Health System: 2020-2023, and the recommendations in the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health Final Report provides an opportunity for a coordinated approach to improve investment and reforms of mental health services by all governments.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you before you deliver the final report, and any future opportunities to collaborate on the implementation of recommendations in the final advice.

To discuss any of the issues raised in this letter, please don’t hesitate to contact me via president@ranzcp.org.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Associate Professor John Allan

President

Ref: 2016