

31 January 2020

Secretary Elizabeth Cosson AM CSC
Department of Veterans' Affairs

By email to: aidan.bright@dva.gov.au

Dear Ms Cosson

Re: Draft Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and National Action Plan 2020-2023

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) commends the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) for developing the Draft Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and National Action Plan 2020-2023 (the Strategy and Action Plan). The RANZCP appreciates the opportunity to contribute feedback to the document, noting that only an overview of our feedback is provided at this time due to the limited consultation time the RANZCP has had to respond to it. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with DVA representatives to discuss the Strategy and Action Plan more fully.

The RANZCP is a membership organisation that is responsible for training, educating and representing psychiatrists in Australia and New Zealand. The RANZCP has more than 6700 members, including over 4800 qualified psychiatrists and more than 1600 trainee members. We are guided on policy matters by a range of expert committees, such as the Military and Veterans' Mental Health Network Working Group (MVMHN), which are well-placed to provide advice in relation to the proposed Strategy and Action Plan. Please see our recently [Position Statement 99: *The Mental Health of Veterans and Defence Force Service Members*](#), developed by the MVMHN in 2019.

The RANZCP recognises the importance of a national Strategy and Action Plan that promotes the mental health of veterans and their families and we have identified a number of opportunities for further development. The RANZCP's response is in line with two of the priorities of the Strategy and Action Plan:

- Priority One, 'facilitating high quality, evidence-based, accessible and tailored healthcare'
- Priority Three, 'enhancing partnerships across government, communities, businesses, service providers, researchers and ex-service organisations'

We also suggest 'strengthening oversight' as an additional priority that should be incorporated.

Priority One - facilitating evidence-based healthcare

The RANZCP is encouraged by the Strategy and Action Plan's emphasis on the provision of evidence-based healthcare, which adheres to recommendations included in [The Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan](#). However, we strongly recommend that the Strategy and Action Plan go further to include recommendations from existing high-quality research in relation to the mental health of veterans. It should also use such evidence to reinforce the programs it supports. This would be in line with several of the Strategy and Action Plan's objectives including Objective 1.3 to, 'apply evidence-informed suicide prevention programs based on lessons from trials and broader government plans, and new approaches that support veteran wellbeing'.

In addition, while there is a significant focus in the Strategy and Action Plan on assistance dogs for persons with PTSD, the RANZCP strongly recommends greater emphasis on the provision of evidence-based mental health services, as provided by psychiatrists. The RANZCP strongly recommends that further work occurs to ensure the Strategy and Action Plan prioritises the funding of evidence-based clinical services that are targeted and appropriate for veterans, with a specific focus on integrating the role of State Governments and the private sector in supporting veterans.

We also recommend that actions within the Strategy and Action Plan incorporates investment to create and nurture experts in the fields of veteran health and wellbeing to work with veterans in the community, and to generate further research and advancements in the field. This is supported by the RANZCP's [2019-20 Pre-Budget Submission](#). In addition, funding must be allocated to Australian research and university partnerships and this should to be reflected in the Strategy and Action Plan.

Priority Three - enhancing partnerships

Whilst the Strategy and Action Plan recognises the importance of enhancing partnerships, its Stakeholder Engagement Strategy (p.48) was disappointing and illustrates that much of the engagement, including with health professionals had focused on 'status updates and monitoring'. The RANZCP urges the DVA to create additional opportunities for the widest possible consultation with experts in the field of veteran mental health. Further engagement would enable collaboration across governments, sectors and communities (Priority Three), and assist in ensuring that relevant national and international literature related to veteran mental health is incorporated into the Strategy and Action Plan (Priority One).

Additional area of consideration - strengthening oversight

The RANZCP encourages DVA to establish an independent oversight committee to monitor implementation of the Strategy and Action Plan and support strategic collaboration and alignment with the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention agenda, the Department of Defence, DVA, and all states and territories. This committee should also help set research priorities and guide the translation of research outcomes. Such a committee would enhance effective partnerships between DVA and those it must work closely with.

The RANZCP strongly supports actions to improve the mental health outcomes for current service members and veterans. We would welcome continued engagement throughout the development of the Strategy and Action Plan and, with additional time, the RANZCP will be able provide a more detailed response.

Please contact Ms Rosie Forster, Executive Manager, Practice, Policy and Partnerships Department via rosie.forster@ranzcp.org or by phone on (03) 9601 4943 should you have any queries or wish to request further information.

Yours sincerely



Associate Professor John Allan
President

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