

Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence And Trade References Committee
Inquiry into adaptive sport programs for Australian Defence Force veterans
February 2023

Improve the mental health of communities

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists Submission

Inquiry into adaptive sport programs for Australian Defence Force veterans

About the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP)

The RANZCP is a membership organisation that prepares doctors to be medical specialists in the field of psychiatry, supports and enhances clinical practice, advocates for people affected by mental illness and advises governments on mental health care. The RANZCP is the peak body representing psychiatrists in Australia and New Zealand and as a bi-national college has strong ties with associations in the Asia-Pacific region.

The RANZCP has more than 7,700 members including more than 5,600 qualified psychiatrists. Psychiatrists are clinical leaders in the provision of mental health care in the community and use a range of evidence-based treatments to support a person in their journey of recovery.

Introduction

The RANZCP welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee's [inquiry into adaptive sport programs for Australian Defence Force \(ADF\) veterans](#).

The RANZCP is aware of the mental health challenges of ADF veterans. The suicide rate of male veterans in Australia is 14% higher than age-matched civilians, and more than twice that of full-time serving members or reserves.[1] Among female veterans, evidence indicates the suicide risk is 115% higher than female civilians.[1] Many Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) clients do not use veterans' services, the [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's](#) report into veteran suicide states that 66% of serving members and veterans who died by suicide were not accessing DVA services.

Considering this, the RANZCP supports efforts to increase the health and wellbeing of veterans, in this case through adaptive sports, and advocates that adaptive sport is introduced as part of systemic reform to a multitude of veterans' wellbeing services.

Informed by feedback from a range of members of the RANZCP's expert committees, including our Military, Veterans' and Emergency Services Personnel Mental Health Network and their Position Statement: [The mental health of veterans and defence force service members](#), the below submission provides our response to the following Inquiry [terms of reference](#):

- (a) current evidence on the benefits adaptive sport can provide to those with physical and/or mental health impairments, particularly those who have also served or trained in national defence;
- (b) the role of sport in supporting individuals' transition from the Australian Defence Force into civilian life, especially how sport may assist veterans who meet criteria identifying them as being most at risk of suicide;
- (h) any other related matters.

Terms of Reference

(a) Current evidence on the benefits adaptive sport can provide to those with physical and/or mental health impairments, particularly those who have also served or trained in national defence.

The RANZCP emphasises the need for mental health treatment to consider quality of life and re-integration into community circles within the development of treatment plans for people with complex mental health needs (such as veterans). Adaptive sports would thus be a welcome inclusion, complementing the wide range of services that ADF veterans require and ensuring that mental health care does not solely take

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place through clinical services. This diversity is key to any biopsychosocial approach that promotes physical activity and community interventions.

Detailed by the [Productivity Commission](#), an effective veteran support system requires a focus on the lifetime wellbeing of veterans, ensuring continuous access to a variety of services throughout discharge and ongoing civilian life. Veterans may require complex interventions which rely on a partnership between community-service providers and health services. DVA provision of adaptive sports can support the linking-up of services, systems and activities, raising awareness of available mental health supports and reducing stigma via the promotion of lived experience.

The RANZCP notes the emerging evidence base for the benefits of veteran sport, but a limitation of evidence in Australia.[2-5] It is therefore important that any significant investment in adaptive sports coincides with mechanisms to measure adaptive sports' impact on mental health outcomes, alongside other relevant barriers and enablers. Long-term research programs based on an exploration of access, experience and outcomes would support evidence-based service delivery.

(b) The role of sport in supporting individuals' transition from the Australian Defence Force into civilian life, especially how sport may assist veterans who meet criteria identifying them as being most at risk of suicide.

Transitioning out of service is a challenging time for ADF veterans. During their transition into civilian life, veterans are confronted by complex systems, both legislatively and administratively, of healthcare and support. Rates of completed suicide in ex-serving ADF males are more than double that of serving ADF males, with increased risk for suicidality observed among those who had recently transitioned out of full-time service.[1] Those who had been medically discharged from the ADF were found to be at a higher risk of suicide and suicidal behaviours (1.9 times higher risk in comparison to those voluntarily discharged).[1]

This risk exemplifies the need to integrate pathways across health, social, and veteran-specific services, especially for those at greater risk due to the nature of their discharge. The RANZCP supports the use of adaptive sports as part of a range of integrated services provided to such at-risk groups. This is supported by the [interim report from the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention](#) (2021) and a study on [Veteran Suicide by the Department of the Senate, Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee](#) (2017), which identify that transition services should be tailored to the needs of individual and offer a range of services to support mental/physical health outcomes and social connectedness.

(h) Any other related matters.

The RANZCP supports the use of adaptive sports to improve the physical and mental health of ADF veterans. To improve the efficacy of adaptive sports, the provision of sports services must be developed within a wider range of systemic reforms aimed at improving the physical and mental health of veterans. The RANZCP emphasise the need for adaptive sports to be provided as part of a range linked services:

- Tailored transition services, tailored to different forms of discharge and transition.
- Peer worker initiatives and visibility of lived experience of a mental health condition for veterans.
- Continuum of care for veterans having a tailored focus on lifetime wellbeing.
- Lifespan approaches when developing services to veterans.
- Processes for rehabilitating psychologically injured soldiers within the workplace.

References

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