



The Royal
Australian &
New Zealand
College of
Psychiatrists



Australian Capital Territory Branch

RANZCP ACT Branch 2025/26 Pre-Budget Submission

A strong and equitable
mental healthcare system
for the ACT

About the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (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 healthcare. 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 over 8,400 members, including more than 5,900 qualified psychiatrists (consisting of both Fellows and Affiliates of the College) and over 2,400 members who are training to qualify as psychiatrists (referred to as Associate members or trainees). As at May 2025, the RANZCP Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Branch represents 96 Fellows and 45 trainees.

The RANZCP ACT Branch submission has been prepared in consultation with the ACT Branch Chair, Committee and wider ACT membership. The RANZCP ACT Branch would like to thank everyone who contributed to this submission.

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Ngunnawal (Nun-ah-wal), the original custodians this land we meet today. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise their ongoing connection to the land and culture. We also acknowledge any other families or people with connections to these lands.

Acknowledgement of Lived Experience

We acknowledge the significant contribution of all people with lived experience of mental illness, and the people who care and support them, to the development and delivery of safe, high-quality mental health services. We recognise those with lived and living experience of a mental health condition, including community members and College members. We affirm their ongoing contribution to the improvement of mental healthcare for all people.

Contact

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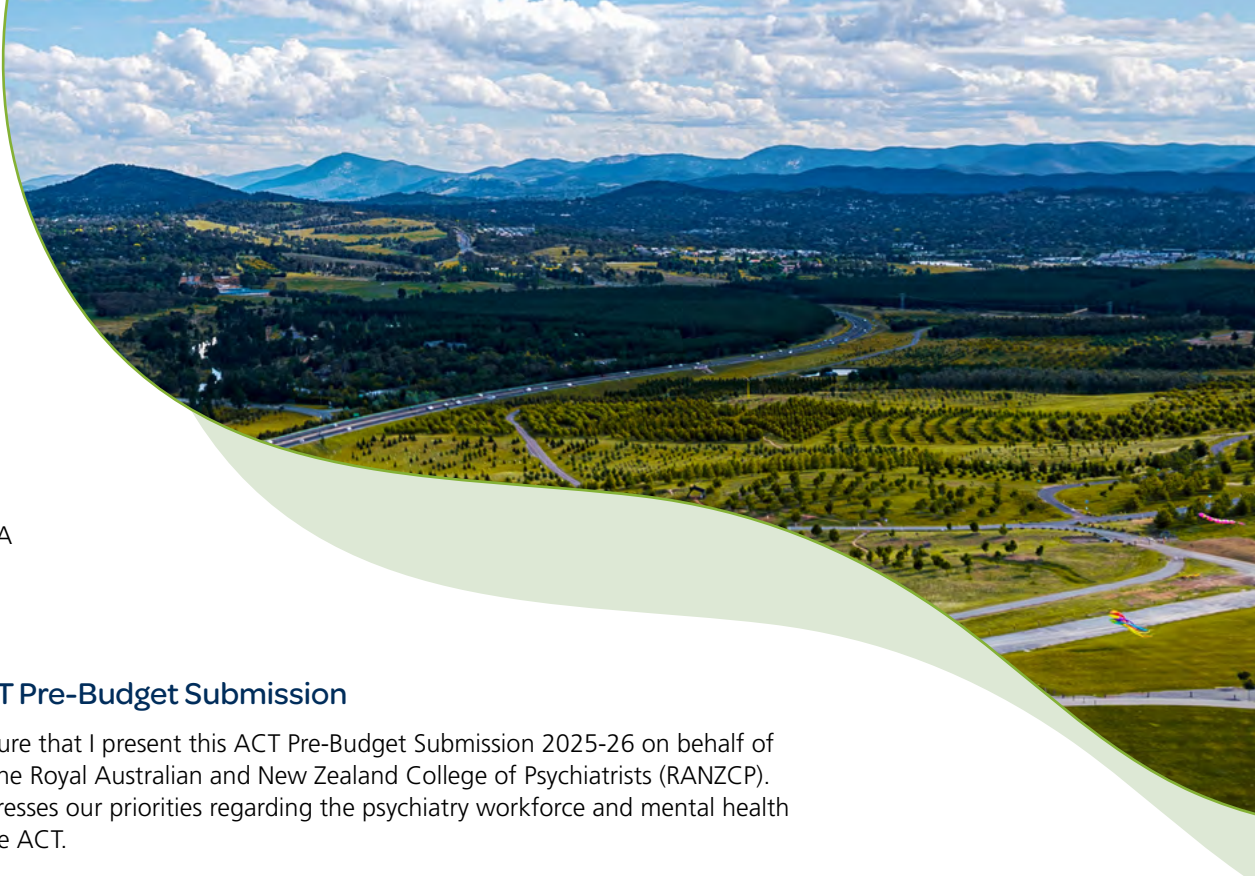
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8 May 2025

Mr Andrew Barr MLA
Treasurer

Dear Treasurer

Re: 2025-26 ACT Pre-Budget Submission

It is with great pleasure that I present this ACT Pre-Budget Submission 2025-26 on behalf of the ACT Branch of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP). This submission addresses our priorities regarding the psychiatry workforce and mental health service delivery in the ACT.

We commend the ACT Government on the commitment it made in January 2025 to inject additional funding into the public health system and ensuring efficient and sustainable delivery of care. However, we urge the Government to continue to improve workplace conditions for the psychiatry workforce through strengthened administrative assistance and greater support for trainees and supervisors. This will help the Government meet its own ongoing commitment to ensuring “high workplace satisfaction and retention rates within the mental health workforce” [1].

Canberrans are fortunate that our public mental health services are of a high standard. Yet there are still gaps. We look forward to providing greater clinical input into what kinds of mental health services are needed at the new North Canberra Hospital, as well as more broadly within the ACT. Mental health services that are working in the south of the city at Canberra Hospital need to be replicated in the north to ensure equity in service delivery. We must also make sure that we have the right mental health services to meet the needs of all Canberrans, including individuals requiring care during the perinatal period, as well as those who would benefit from extended inpatient care.

The Branch is committed to supporting Canberra’s private practice psychiatrists. We recognise the Government’s commitment to supporting the work of, and the public service’s engagement with, private psychiatry. For example, with the RANZCP Let’s MEET continuing professional development events, ongoing meetings, and conferences.

In addition, the Government’s plan for ACT Health to absorb the Community Services Directorate presents opportunities to address the social and environmental factors that impact people’s mental health. We look forward to working with you to realise this potential.



Yours sincerely,

A/Prof Denise Riordan
Chair, RANZCP ACT Branch



Priority 1:

Support and strengthen the mental health workforce by attracting, training, and retaining psychiatrists



1. Attract and retain psychiatrists through better working conditions.

- A challenge within the ACT's mental health workforce is the attraction and retention of senior psychiatrists, who are increasingly moving into private practice, locum work, or employment in other jurisdictions due to poor conditions. The ACT consistently attracts enough people who want to train to become psychiatrists. However, the loss of senior psychiatrists poses a threat to the ACT training program and the future mental health workforce.
- We are concerned that in the context of a significant budget deficit the additional \$227.3 million that the Government has recently committed to invest in the ACT's health system to meet demand will be generated by cutting some positions [2]. Our concern is a potential loss of necessary administrative roles in this process.
- In fact, what the mental health system needs is an increase in administrative capacity to support frontline clinical service delivery. In a RANZCP survey, 73% of respondent psychiatrists in the ACT said support with paperwork would help decrease burnout and increase job satisfaction [3]. Given this context, additional psychiatry positions are not a priority for Canberra's public mental health system; rather, the immediate focus needs to be on an increase in administrative staff.

- Not only would this help retain existing psychiatrists, but it would also attract psychiatrists into vacant positions by making the ACT's public health system a better place to work. The system can be further strengthened by providing psychiatrists with more flexible work arrangements, better staff cover, and office spaces for non-clinical work.
- Worsening conditions for staff specialists and trainees, including increased administrative burden and rising clinical demands, contributed to some psychiatrists participating in the industrial action led by the ACT Branch of the Australian Salaried Medical Officers Federation in 2024 [4]. To avoid further industrial action like the mass resignation of psychiatrists in New South Wales, we are eager to work with the Government to support the workforce.
- We note that the Government has committed to reducing the ACT public health system's reliance on agency locums [2]. However, improved conditions for psychiatrists and other staff specialists will result in more permanent positions being filled and the need for locums decreasing over time.

2. Improve psychiatry training by supporting trainees and supervisors.

- While the number of psychiatry trainees in the ACT is strong, we urge the Government to ensure continued capacity for their supervision. Improving work conditions through decreased administrative burden will free up time for psychiatrists to commit to supervision, ensuring trainees are well-supported.

Priority 2:

Prioritise clinical input in service design and delivery of mental health services across the ACT

1. Plan and develop a high dependency unit within the proposed mental health facility at North Canberra Hospital, and a co-located short stay mental health unit.


- The High Dependency Unit (HDU) within the Adult Mental Health Unit (AMHU) at Canberra Hospital, and the co-located Short Stay Mental Health Unit (SSMHU), are critical to the provision of mental healthcare in the ACT. The development of comparable units at North Canberra Hospital would therefore ensure that what is already working in the south of the ACT is replicated in the north, creating geographical equity in service provision.
- HDUs enable the safe treatment of high-risk mental health inpatients [5]. Having HDUs at both public hospitals in Canberra will enable patients with severe and complex mental health needs to receive treatment regardless of where in the city they live.
- SSMHUs enable short-term mental health care for inpatients who need extended assessment or crisis intervention [6]. Importantly, SSMHUs have been found to help reduce emergency department wait times at hospitals for mental health patients [6]. Therefore, a SSMHU in the north of Canberra will further ensure territory-wide uniformity in the provision of mental health services that are proven to be effective.

2. Plan and build a secure long stay mental health unit.

- The ACT needs a secure Long Stay Mental Health Unit (LSMHU). While the existing Adult Mental Health Unit (AMHU) and the Adult Mental Health Rehabilitation Unit (AMHRU) sometimes provide long-term care, they are not designed to do.
- The LSMHU should be designed and dedicated to providing care to acute patients, including those admitted under involuntary treatment orders, who need extended care over a period of two months or more. This would free up beds at the AMHU and the AMHRU to be used for their intended purpose of providing inpatient care for short periods of time.

3. Enable and permit involuntary mental health treatment and admissions at the existing North Canberra Hospital.

- Currently, patients who present to the emergency department at North Canberra Hospital can only be treated and admitted voluntarily, rather than involuntarily. This may mean that some patients with severe and complex mental health needs will not receive care.
- We ask the Government to make a determination that North Canberra Hospital can treat and admit mental health patients involuntarily under the Mental Health Act 2015. We will work with the Government to ensure any necessary changes within mental health services at North Canberra Hospital are made to enable the facility to undertake this function.



4. Commit to the development of the planned acute perinatal and infant mental health unit.

- We note that during the 2024 ACT election, ACT Labor promised to deliver a new 6-bed mother and baby unit (MBU) to provide perinatal and infant mental healthcare [7]. We urge the Government to follow through on this promise to improve mental healthcare for Canberran parents.
- Currently in the ACT, parents with acute mental health needs must be separated from their babies in order to receive inpatient care [7]. In cases where mothers are experiencing severe and complex mental health issues, an MBU would help prevent the unnecessary separation of them from their babies, which disrupts the development of healthy relationships [8]. MBUs are critical for the health and wellbeing of primary caregivers, infants, wider family, and reduce the risk for ongoing demand for healthcare [8].
- The RANZCP refers to benchmarking by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (UK), which estimates that an 8-bed MBU is needed for every 15,000 births per year [8]. Based on this formula, the ACT requires an MBU with 4 beds to cover Canberra's 6,000 births each year. The Government could therefore revise its plan and develop an MBU with only 4 beds rather than 6. In addition, access to a non-acute fifth bed could be purchased from Hyson Green.

5. Ensure psychiatrists are consulted on plans for mental health services.

- Psychiatrists provide important insights into the planning of clinical mental health facilities based on their experience of working in these settings. We urge the Government to ensure psychiatrists in the ACT are consulted on proposals for the development of new mental health facilities in Canberra.
- Psychiatrists in the ACT's mental health system know the strengths and weaknesses of the existing mental health units at Canberra Hospital. The planning of the new mental health facility at North Canberra Hospital is an opportunity for the Government to seek valuable input from psychiatrists about what kinds of units are needed at the facility.

References

1. ACT Government. A framework for change: the ACT mental health workforce strategy. 2023.
2. ABC News. Millions of dollars in funding announced as Canberra's hospitals experience 'significant increased pressure'. 2025.
3. Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. Burnout and moral injury: Australian psychiatry at its limits. 2024.
4. Riotact. ACT doctors rally outside hospital and flag increased industrial action as wage dispute intensifies. 2024.
5. Victoria Department of Health. Locked areas: staffing requirements within mental health inpatient units. 2023.
6. Anderson K, Goldsmith L, Lomani J, Ali Z, Clarke G, Crowe C, Jarman H, Johnson S, McDaid D, Pariza P, Park A, Smith J, Stovold E, Turner K, Gillard S. Short-stay crisis units for mental health patients on crisis care pathways: systematic review and meta-analysis. 2022; 8: 1-14.
7. Riotact. ACT Labor promises to establish first mums and bubs mental health unit in the capital. 2024
8. Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. Position statement 57: perinatal mental health services. 2021.



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