

MEDIA RELEASE

Release date: **Thursday 13 June, 2013**

Mental health spending takes place in an 'information vacuum'

Major gaps exist in our knowledge about what types of programs actually work to help people with mental illness, despite the billions of dollars invested in the sector, a new review released today shows.

The Sax Institute's Evidence Check Review, conducted for the Mental Health Commission of NSW, shows that while the conservative cost of mental illness to the community is more than \$10 billion a year, there is little Australian research available on where those taxpayer dollars would be most effectively spent.

"Australia is operating in an information vacuum when it comes to developing mental health programs and much more research is needed," said review author Professor Christopher Doran, from the Hunter Medical Research Institute.

And Australia is not alone. The World Health Organisation recently observed that no country to date has been able to clearly link mental health strategic policy or investment decisions to a credible, consistent and evidence-based assessment of what interventions actually work best and at what cost.

One in five Australian adults has suffered from mental illness in the past 12 months, but most research on what might work to reduce their illness burden has focused on medication and therapy rather than what sorts of programs might be effective in schools or the workplace, according to the review.

This was a critical omission because mental illness reduces a person's chances of completing school, getting a job and being a productive member of society.

The review also found more effective strategies were required to detect and treat children susceptible to a mental disorder, together with employment programs to better re-engage those not in the labour force.

It also highlighted that little Australian research existed on the economic consequences of patients having gaps in their treatment and more information was needed on the true costs of interruptions to care when patients moved between hospitals and the community.

NSW Mental Health Commissioner John Feneley said it was crucial to be informed about the real cost of mental illness and which types of care and treatment made the most difference and offered the best value for money.

"The review identifies a range of strategies which are proven to be effective, and others that demonstrate real promise," he said. "There is a real need for investment in areas of promising work, and this investment should include the funds to evaluate that work. As we do more research we will have more confidence in knowing the programs we are funding meet the needs of the consumers."

Mr Feneley said the review would offer a foundation for the Commission as it prepares to develop a draft Strategic Plan for Mental Health in NSW.

“The Plan will take a whole-of-government approach to delivering programs that really work for people. Knowing more about the impact of mental illness and its treatment is a crucial first step in informing the Strategic Plan and improving the experience of people in NSW who live with mental illness.”

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Full copies of the review ‘*A rapid review of the costs and benefits of interventions in the area of mental health*’ can be downloaded at: <https://www.saxinstitute.org.au/publications/costs-and-benefits-of-mental-health-interventions/>