

## **Productivity Commission: Mental Health Inquiry**

### ***Reform area 1: prevention and early intervention for mental illness and suicide attempts***

#### **Every School, Every Child - The case for school nursing in Australia**

Research shows that more than 75 per cent of mental health issues develop before the age of 25. Childhood and Adolescence is a critical time to identify and take action to support both the student and their families. School Nurses present as a significant, cost effective primary healthcare measure in addressing the mental health concerns of our young people and their families in Australia.

Mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness but also encompasses social, emotional, and behavioural health and the ability to cope with life's challenges. Mental health problems are linked to negative outcomes such as academic and behaviour problems, absenteeism, leaving formal education early.

Students who receive mental health support achieve better academically, attend school regularly and integrate into the school and classroom environment well. Overall, behaviour, learning, and students' sense of connectedness and well-being all improve as well.

Schools are an ideal place to provide mental and physical health services to children and youth. Most children spend at least 6 hours a day at school. Schools offer an ideal context for prevention, intervention, positive development, and regular communication between school and families. School nurses and school psychologists know the students, parents, and other staff, which contributes to accessibility of services. Research has shown that students are more likely to seek help when a school nurse is available and, in some cases, such as rural areas, schools provide the only mental health services in the community.

School nurses are in a unique position for the early detection and implementation of support of those students who are suspected to have poor or deteriorating mental health. Additionally, the role of a school nurse provides strategies for the promotion of good mental health, lifestyle & sleep habits which impact mental health significantly in young people.

#### **Early detection**

Often students present with somatic symptoms that are the first indications of mental illness. A thorough mental health assessment is always part of a school nurse assessment no matter how they present to the nurse. It is often the 'frequent flyers' to the Health Centre that trigger an early alert. Assessment and flagging of students and staff at risk or showing signs of deteriorating mental health and early referral to appropriate services/supports can literally save lives.

#### **Safe Schools**

School nurses are essential to creating and sustaining safe schools. Increased access to mental health support in schools is vital to improving the physical and psychological safety of our students and schools, as well as academic performance and problem-solving skills.

School nurses provide a safe place for time-out for those students needed extra support during school day including self-harm management encompassing dressings, referral and risk-assessment.

School nurses can provide support that encompasses social-emotional learning, mental wellness, resilience, and positive connections between students and adults which are essential to creating a school culture in which students feel safe and empowered to report safety concerns.

## **Trusted**

School nurses are invaluable in often being the first person that the student encounters when seeking help. School nurses are safe, approachable and accessible and do not hold the same stigma that may prevent health seeking from other mental health professionals. The student may be reporting a headache or somatic symptoms to the nurse who can then effectively determine if there are any other relevant mental health concerns using both clinical judgement and effective mental health screening tools.

## **Collaboration & Co-ordination**

School nurses provide referral to appropriate services. School nurses work collaboratively with school counsellors, teachers, pastoral carers, parents and doctors. They are uniquely placed to provide an overall umbrella of support and oversight.

## **Follow up**

In the aftermath of a crisis, school nurses can provide support that facilitates a return to normality and can help to identify and work with students with more intense or ongoing needs. The school nurse can work with other support staff to provide ongoing support following a crisis and continue to monitor the students as required.

## **Health Promotion**

School nurses are an essential arm of public health promoting wellness and preventing injury. School nurses influence attendance, which influences achievement and school completion rates.

## **World Best Practice**

Looking at models of care throughout the world we see that most Scandinavian countries, the UK, the USA, Japan, and many developed countries all have a school nurses integrated into their schools with significant positive outcomes for the whole of society.

School nurses serve a vital role in the school community by promoting positive mental health outcomes in students through evidence-based programs and curricula. As members of interdisciplinary teams, school nurses collaborate with school personnel, community health care professionals, students and families in the assessment, identification, intervention, referral and follow-up of children in need of mental health service. In addition, school nurses serve as advocates and facilitators of mental health services both within the school environment and in the community.

School nurses are uniquely positioned between policymakers and the student body as caregivers, advocates, and experts. This vantage point affords the school nurse the ability to identify and intervene with at-risk adolescents as well as lead in developing prevention policy and further research.

Mental health is a key component in children's healthy development; children need to be healthy in order to learn, grow, and lead productive lives.

**References/Recommended Reading:**

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