

5 April 2019

To the Productivity Commission

RE: Mental Health Inquiry

I write to acknowledge your current inquiry into the social and economic benefits of improving mental health in Australia.

As Disability Services Commissioner, I have responsibility for handling complaints about Victorian disability service providers. I often see in the work of this office and more broadly, interactions with the disability sector, cases where an individual's intellectual, neurological, physical, cognitive or other disability contributes to their general mental ill-health.

I recognise that there are many mental health specialists who can provide greater depth of feedback to your inquiry, including individuals like my counterpart at the Mental Health Complaints Commissioner.

However, I feel it important to raise the following points for your consideration:

1. That the mental health of at-risk socially-isolated people with disability should be considered;
2. That people with dual or multiple disabilities are at greater risk of social isolation; and
3. That any final recommendations relating to social isolation and inclusion should be inclusive of all people with disability, including those with dual or multiple disabilities.

There are situations where individuals with disability may have paid supports in their life (e.g. a support worker), thus are technically in contact with other people every day but may otherwise be socially isolated. Australian Bureau of Statistics show that individuals with profound disability are much less likely to participate in social activities outside of home, and that social participation for people with profound or severe limitation is lower than those with moderate or mild limitation.

We also know that people with disability who only have paid supports in their lives are more vulnerable to abuse. This vulnerability also extends after a traumatic event, with people who have limited verbal communication skills being more vulnerable to developing post traumatic stress because they may not have the language to express their experience and fears. Specialised mental health interventions and support are required to support the needs of people with disability after a traumatic event.

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Also, when the only social support in your life are paid supports, loneliness may become a constant factor. Loneliness has been linked to depression, poorer cardiovascular health and faster rates of cognitive decline and dementia. It is a public health issue. However, many loneliness initiatives don't consider accessibility for people with disability.

As a nation, we need to consider many different measures to increase the full social and economic participation of people with disability. These might include examples such as:

- Growing economic participation of people with disability;
- Improving environmental accessibility of public spaces;
- Improving funding for individualised care so that individuals don't have to be 'put to bed' at 6pm; and
- Addressing social and cultural attitudinal barriers to engaging with people with disability.

I urge you to consider the mental health and social inclusion needs of all people with disability during the course of your inquiry into mental health in Australia.

Regards

Arthur Rogers

Victorian Disability Services Commissioner

About the Disability Services Commissioner

The Disability Services Commissioner (DSC) is an independent oversight body resolving complaints and promoting the right of people with a disability to be free from abuse.

Our complaints resolution process is free, confidential and supportive and we encourage and assist the resolution of complaints in a variety of ways including early resolution, conciliation, or investigation. Our person-centred approach aims to achieve improved service outcomes while actively supporting the rights of people with disability to live with dignity and respect.

We also have secondary oversight of critical incident reports of assault, abuse, neglect, unexplained injury and death. We have the power to initiate investigations into issues of abuse and neglect in Victorian disability services.

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