



19 December 2019

Michael Brennan  
Productivity Commission  
Locked Bag 2, Collins Street East  
Melbourne VIC 3008

By online submission.

Dear Commissioner Brennan

**Re: Inquiry into Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory**

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) welcomes the opportunity to make further comment on the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory (NT).

The RANZCP is responsible for training, educating and representing psychiatrists in Australia and New Zealand. The College has more than 6700 members, including more than 5000 qualified psychiatrists and over 1600 associate (trainee) members. The RANZCP is guided on policy matters by a range of expert committees, who are well placed to provide insight into addressing the challenges related to expenditure on children in the NT.

We would like to begin by commending the Commission on the breadth and depth of the draft report and the ambitious recommendations for change and improvement. The commitment to transparency and collaboration marks a positive shift in the culture of service delivery in the NT. We also value the acknowledgement of the need for culturally capable services given the specific needs and ambitions of Aboriginal communities in the Territory.

We are concerned by the limited emphasis on mental health and mental health services contained within the report. The recently published draft report from the Productivity Commission into Mental Health highlighted that many mental illnesses emerge in childhood and addressing risk factors is a cost-effective approach to improving life-long outcomes. [1] The NT Branch encourages the Commission to ensure recommendations integrate mental health services into the general healthcare and social services systems. Mental illness is often present alongside poor physical health, obesity, and substance abuse, and should not be treated in isolation. [2]

The Commission should investigate further the governance mechanism which would oversee and bring together the diversity of government agencies, NGOs and other stakeholders currently delivering mental health services in the NT. The Commission correctly identified that there are a multitude of services available to support the development and wellbeing of children in the Northern Territory. However, the lack of coordination is creating an inefficient system in which many young people do not have access to the services and support they need.

The integration of funding would allow for the development of universal reporting requirements which would reduce administrative burden, identify areas of overlap, and provide more accurate data for planning and service development. The NT Branch specifically urges government to prioritise the integration of IT systems to assist in growing a culture of cooperation and collaboration across services.

The RANZCP NT Branch accepts in principle the proposal for funds pooling which would allow for appropriate monitoring and evaluation of service delivery and workforce planning. We strongly advocate for funds pooling to be piloted on perinatal and community focused child and adolescent mental health services. It is well established that investment in perinatal mental health improves health outcomes for children, reducing long-term costs associated with later interventions. [3] However in order for the funds pooling approach to be successful, the culture of reluctance to share data between service providers and government needs to be overcome. There will be no success without fostering collaboration and shared goals. We also encourage any approach to keep consumer and carers at the centre of all decision-making.

If you would like to discuss any of the issues raised in our letter and formal submission, I can be contacted via Amelia Rhodes, our Policy Manager,

Yours sincerely

Dr David Chapman  
**Chair, RANZCP NT Branch Chair**

### **References**

1. Productivity Commission. Inquiry into Mental Health, Draft Report. Canberra; 2019.
2. Teesson M, Slade T, Mills K. Comorbidity in Australia: Findings of the 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing. Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry [Internet]. 2009 [cited 27 November 2019];43(7):606-614.
3. Rutherford C, Sharp H, Hill J, Pickles A, Taylor-Robinson D. How does perinatal maternal mental health explain early social inequalities in child behavioural and emotional problems? Findings from the Wirral Child Health and Development Study. PLOS ONE. 2019; 14(5).