

22 January 2020

Mental Health Inquiry
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City ACT 2601

Response to draft report

Please find following comments relating to the draft report on the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the effect of mental health on people's ability to participate in and prosper in the community and workplace and the effects it has more generally on our economy and productivity.

Marathon Health is a not-for-profit, registered charity delivering high quality health and wellbeing services to people in country NSW and the ACT. We are one of the few health organisations based in country Australia with the core purpose to identify, deliver and sustain services to people within these communities. We are passionate advocates for equal access to quality health services for people, wherever they choose to live.

More than 60% of our work is in the mental health space and we are the largest provider of headspace services in Australia, with seven centres across regional NSW and the ACT. This gives us a unique experience as we have exposure to a combination service delivery models that cover both country and metropolitan settings.

The headspace model is highly successful in our experience. In 2018-19, we provided nearly 17,600 occasions of service to young people at five fully-operational centres, supporting 4,270 young people, of whom 12.6% were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Outcomes data for headspace nationally shows that the mental health of more than 62% of young people improves as a result of headspace involvement. This increases to 68% if they attend five or six sessions. Awareness of the model is high, with more than three-quarters of young Australians recognising the organisation's brand and satisfaction ratings range from 85% for eheadspace to 87% for centre-based supports.

We agree with the report's recognition of the need for a generational shift in Australia's mental health system to set the nation on a path for maintainable long-term reform. While we endorse the priority reforms that have been identified in principle, we raise the following issues of concern.

1. Removal of quarantining of funds for headspace

The headspace model has been operating for more than 13 years and there are currently new centres being rolled out across Australia. The report suggests removal of quarantining of funds for headspace. Our view is that this could lead to funds being diverted to untried and untested programs and have adverse impacts on the continuity of supports, while also providing less clarity for people trying to find the right care pathway.

2. Care for mental health needs should match those needs

The report makes the assertion that low intensity supports are always appropriate for young people, when this is not the case. At headspace, there is no “wrong door” – we strive to match our services to the clinical needs of the young people looking for them. Some need more intensive therapy and over a longer period.

Low intensity supports are proving valuable, particularly models like NewAccess that we have introduced across a number of regions for situations ranging from drought and bushfire support to apprentices and their employers. However, there are limitations in the type of clinical presentations that suit low intensity support and a stepped care model is essential.

Based on our experience of delivering stepped care models of mental health, we need to create opportunities to step clients up to more intensive programs and also to direct them back into the care of community-based programs.

headspace is sometimes criticised for not delivering solutions for people with all needs – but the model has limitations in reaching the “missing middle” – where headspace stops and acute care starts. Our staff sometimes find that the only solution is to transfer a client to an emergency department because there is no pathway to elevate their support needs. Going forward, we need to ensure we do not overlook these people in the middle who need and deserve a supported pathway.

3. headspace is not a one size fits all model

The report gives the impression that headspace is a one size fits all model that can be implemented in the same format in any community. Each of our headspace centres is embedded in its local community. This is not a cookie cutter model that can be simply rolled out. We have a local consortium of community stakeholders and a youth reference group associated with each of our centres to direct and guide our operations. They are an integral part of service and program design to ensure we are genuinely connected to each community and delivering services that are responsive and flexible enough to meet the specific needs that community.

We also work in partnership with other organisations to deliver collaborative, innovative programs, events and activities that ultimately have broader impact for local communities. We regularly collaborate with local councils, schools and other service providers to ensure we have the greatest reach possible.

We try to locate our centres in town centres, where they are easy to access. We are also growing our outreach and school delivery models to ensure that access to our headspace services does not pose restrictions to any young people seeking help. We need to guarantee a clear pathway to support anyone presenting with a mental health concern. The same information should be available from someone at school or a GP to allow a clear support plan to be developed without any confusion, complications of difficulty navigating the system.

Our view is that this report needs to focus on the importance of co-design of programs and consider recommendations that ensure young people are at the core of developing service design and delivery. Without their input, any attempts to reform youth mental health system will struggle to succeed.

4. IPS delivering good results

The IPS model is working very successfully at headspace Dubbo. In a relatively short period of time, it has become a safe and approachable program for young people to reach into the employment and education sector, many overcoming significant barriers. In our first 18 months, we saw more than 100 clients and achieved strong success in linking young people to employment or training—young people who otherwise may have been at risk of long-term unemployment in Dubbo's competitive employment environment.

Access to vocational support that does not require eligibility for Centrelink payments is critical. We are looking forward to opportunities to roll that program out to our other centres.

5. Support for people with severe mental ill health

There is a significant lack of support for people with mental ill health who do not qualify for psychosocial funding under the NDIS. There needs to be a focus on community-based solutions for people who do not fall within the NDIS framework.

6. Flexibility is the key

We recognise that a review of the Medical Benefits Scheme has begun and this is crucial for ensuring that people of all ages can find a pathway to the counselling they need, but we need to find flexible solutions. People with mental ill health should not be blocked from seeking treatment by barriers such as the need for a diagnosis or a mental health treatment plan or a limit on the number of sessions they are entitled to.

7. Funding arrangements

While the concept of pooling Australian Government and State/Territory Government funding for mental health seems a logical move to both improve care continuity and create incentives for more efficient and effective use of taxpayer money, this raises concerns about the drain of funds. We are concerned this could present the risk of the acute sector consuming the bulk of available funds, when there is a need to ensure continuity of service delivery across the community sector.

Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this important review. Effective investment in early intervention is crucial in the area of mental health. We hope this inquiry will play a key role in improving mental health outcomes in the future—for the benefit of the individuals affected and the nation as a whole.

Yours sincerely

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CEO