

The Employee Assistance Professionals Association of Australasia (EAPAA) believes the current inquiry by the productivity commission is a tremendous step in uncovering the actual impact of mental health on individuals and Australia. EAPAA is the leading association body for the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) industry in Australasia (Australia and New Zealand). The "EAP sector" refers to organisations/businesses in Australia which deliver and "consume" EAPs. Funded by the employer EAPs seek to support mental wellbeing at work through offering confidential counselling services free to employees and their immediate family members. A workplace can enter into a contract with an EAP provider to provide, as an example, up to 4 sessions to each staff member on a self-referral basis and the employer pays the cost. Less structured fee-for-service contracts are also typical — services delivered by qualified professionals such as psychologists, social workers, counsellors, nurses, and psychotherapists.

EAPAA sets and mandates strict constitutional and ethical codes of the association which have been in place for over twenty-six years. These codes ensure all EAPAA members deliver services which are of industry-leading standard, and up to date with latest best practice procedures and protocols and avoid the "pitfalls" that can occur in providing mental health services in the workplace. EAPAA is confident in saying that no other workplace mental health industry or providers are bound to such stringent ethical and service standard requirements.

Providing mental health services to the workplace provides EAPAA and its members a unique perspective on mental health, its impact on society and the work environment. This perspective grew from the 27 years EAPAA has been the peak EAP industry body in Australia and New Zealand. The information provided in this submission will centre on EAPAA's experience and knowledge of mental health in the workplace, servicing the "missing middle" proportion of those in the population living with mental health challenges and illnesses, and the role the workplace does and can play in the supporting those experiencing these challenges.

It's common knowledge that the prevalence of mental health issues is rising in Australia and across the developed world with over 4 million Australians receiving assistance for mental health issues in 2017 -2018 financial year (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2019). The workplace plays an unlikely but critical role in helping to refute this trend and see an impactful change in the way Australia views and engages in mental health support and development. The workforce constitutes the largest captured population in society as more people routinely frequently engage in work and work-related activities. This captive

audience is key to strategically engaging individuals with mental health support and ensuring accessible mental health resources are available to most Australians. The workforce plays a critical role in preventing individuals from experiencing minor to moderate mental health challenges and intermittent illness. As correctly identified in the issues paper, this portion of the community in need of support are not the "highest needs" nor do they require the costliest intervention, but they are the most extensive population needing assistance which places the greatest strain on resources. Most community resources prioritise those experiencing the most significant impact and distress from mental illness. Understandably those suffering mild to moderate challenges are often placed at the bottom of the priority list which can mean they wait a significant time to receive support or are turned away when resources are over loaded.

Sometimes referred to as the "missing middle" it can be challenging for those experiencing mild-moderate mental health challenges to find appropriate resources and support for assistance promptly. Typically, this population is experiencing depressive, anxiety and stress-related symptoms, triggered by a life circumstance (e.g., work pressure, relationship breakdown, illness, and financial strains). Although minor to moderate these symptoms impact an individual's wellbeing to the extent that they impede the person's ability to "function" at the optimal in society and work. With appropriate intervention these stressors generally only have a momentary impact on the functioning and wellbeing, however, if left unattended or inappropriately addressed (e.g., poor coping strategies such as drinking or inadequate mental health support) individuals can experience ongoing issues, and their symptoms can develop into significantly debilitating problems.

Stemming the flow of individuals progressing from mild-moderate issues to severe issues is a critical strategy in slowing down and reversing the increasing trend and impact of mental health issues on the wellbeing of Australian's and the Australian economy (reduce the cost of absenteeism, presenteeism, and mental health treatments – all well documented in the issues paper). The EAP industry sits as a prime vehicle to aid the government in enhancing supporting the "missing middle" through targeted intervention and case management. The EAP industry as outlined above works directly with the working population of Australia and their immediate families. Through effective use of EAPs the government can relieve the strain placed on public resources by the "missing middle" to allow for additional funding and effort to be placed in assisting those experiencing significant and ongoing mental health illnesses (those in most significant need) and preparing the next generation through proactive mental health education for school students.

"Upskilling" the workplace in its understanding of proper mental health safety and service provision within this context can make it the perfect environment for early identification and intervention for those experiencing mild-moderate mental health challenges. Part of the challenge with educating people in what mental health challenges look, feel, sound and behave like is that with the unique components of everyone's lives, they can vary greatly person-to-person. As the workplace is the greatest captured population, it provides a "commonality," a relatable, universal aspect of life to centre language dialogue. This commonality provides a tremendous opportunity to create a clear pathway for individuals from recognition of their symptoms to accessing appropriate support. The workplace also

plays an important role in assisting people "re-engage" socially and engage in purposeful behaviour which significantly aids recovery.

The benefits to organisations supporting and enhancing the mental health of their workforce are known, and organisations are investing in this area, which is supported by the between 5% per annum growth our industry has been experiencing since 2015 (IBIS World, 2015). EAPAA and our provider members believe that to further enhance corporate investment into mental health the discussion needs to move focus from "awareness" to "action." During the recent growth and focus on mental health in the public and workforce, the message has centered on educating people on the prevalence, impact, and diversity of mental health issues. Success from this movement is seeing mental health taken more seriously and investment from organisations increase. Transitioning this knowledge into solution focussed "what can we do about it?" thinking is the next step, and this is unclear to many business leaders. Just like with individuals struggling to navigate the diversity of mental health resources available to them, business leaders are unsure of what actions they can take, what is relevant mental health support for their workforce and its unique needs, and what constitutes a thorough holistic mental health strategy. This lack of confidence impacts the amount of investing organisations are willing to commit. Educating on the "actionable" steps is where the conversation now needs to head.

EAPAA believes building confidence in business leaders through education as to what are valid and reliable actions they can take will see organisations enhance their investment in this area. This Investment would help achieve the goals outlined above of seeing corporate Australia relieve the strain on government mental health resources. Education for workplaces needs to focus on;

1) *Education*

Helping organisations understand what constitutes an appropriate and effective mental health "program" in the workplace. Understanding of strategy will help focus organisation's efforts and develop confidence in success and give organisations and their decision makers a clear understanding of how they can move from being a mental health "aware" organisation, to a mental health "actioning" organisation.

2) *Licensing and registration*

Helping organisations understand the proper certification, membership, licensing, insurances, and quality control mechanisms available to corporate mental health providers, so they identify and be confident in engaging "quality" providers.

3) *Return on Investment*

Educating organisations on how to truly and accurately measure the ROI for mental health programs. Establishing accurate ROI figures can often be tricky due to the confidential nature of mental health support, but it is possible. If organisations could confidently assess the ROI of their mental health initiatives, they would undoubtedly be more obliging in investing further into mental health.

The topic of mental health has "boomed" over the last decade, and as such there are numerous new registrations and practitioner titles developed that are not appropriately

monitored by any reputable association body. Although a positive concerning providing more avenues to support it has created an opportunity for underqualified and inexperienced clinicians and organisations enter the industry which to a degree has damaged the perception of reliability, and through associate tarnished the reputation of established controlled programs and providers such as EAP, EAPAA, and our provider members.

To further support investment from the corporate sector EAPAA believes that government support through acknowledgment and endorsement of proven, established and controlled initiatives such as EAP would see investment enhanced. Stricter protocols from the government such as the requirement of registration/membership to associations such as ours which can monitor practitioner experiences, mandate minimum procedure and quality standards, and validate updates to best practice methodologies will enhance the image of the industry through ensuring quality control. Currently, although there are strict requirements on joining EAPAA, there is no legislation or rules prohibiting organisations and individuals from labelling themselves "EAP providers" and delivering "shonky" EAP programs. EAPAA membership identifies those organisations which are of the highest quality and experience, but we are unable to protect the reputation of the industry as a whole due to this lack of regulation.

How EAPAA can Assist the Government

EAPAA believes that we can play a pivotal role in supporting the government in reducing the impact of mental health on productivity through growing the role of corporate Australia in enhancing and protecting the mental health of Australians. Our industry has been present in Australia since their arrival in the 1980s as one of the first widely recognised corporate mental health "products." Our industry is "broad-brush" meaning that we work across the spectrum of mental health issues which present in the workplace. This experience and breadth of application make EAP and EAPAA the perfect collaborator with the government on this topic.

We believe that our experience places EAPAA correctly in assisting the government with educating corporates and organisational decision makers on the critical education points outlined above. Collaborating with the government to design and implement government indorsed educational programs would be a tremendous step forward in helping organisations move from "awareness" about mental health, to "action."

As a \$250 million-dollar per annum industry growing at 5.5% annually (IBIS World, 2015) EAP is the largest mental health industry in corporate Australia while also being the longest established. A recent internal research project of a mere 10% of our membership, included data from over 3 million Australians and New Zealanders. From this size, reach and experiences EAPAA has developed a rigorous constitution to help build and maintain strict service standards and guidelines. These are used to ensure our membership comprises only of competent providers of EAP services who run their businesses ethically and professionally. Currently, however, there is no legal requirement for individuals and organisations providing EAP services in Australia to be part of EAPAA or member of any other governing body. Although EAPAA membership is a mandatory prerequisite for

candidates set out by some organisations when acquiring EAP services, many individuals are left vulnerable to being exposed to unethical and unprofessional services/support if their organisation does not engage an EAPAA member provider. EAPAA implores to the Australian government to help us protect our industry, the wellbeing of millions of Australians and enable organisations to confidently do their part in supporting mental health in Australia by working with EAPAA to effectively legislate the mandatory membership of EAP providers to EAPAA.

As an empowered industry governance body EAPAA can continue our work ensuring that Australian EAP providers are amongst the best in the world. Through this, we will help the government guarantee that the mental health resource available to the most Australians is one that can be firmly relied upon to be impactful, ethical and innovative. Our strong focus on industry standards, research and ethical practice in a developing world ensures that we have the resources and experience to govern an industry whose role in Australian society and "winning the fight" against mental health.

The workplace plays a critical role in helping reduce the growing mental health rate in Australia, reducing the strain on government resources and provide appropriate services to those experiencing mild-moderate mental health issues. EAPAA has seen much change in the space of mental health in the workplace. The significant rise in the attention it has received from both organisations and government has been very welcomed and helped Australia's largest captured audience (the workforce) grow their knowledge about mental health and its impact. It is, however, time now for action. Awareness around mental health, its presence, and impact on lives/productivity are now widely known, and the missing gap is about putting clear steps in place for Australian organisations to follow in setting up their mental health programs.

Confidence from industry in setting up appropriate, reliable, and professional mental health services for their employees would see a more significant investment in these services and a vaster role played by industry in addressing mental health issues in the community. EAPAA believes that this larger active role in treating mental health will significantly reduce the impact mental health has on productivity and its cost to the economy.

EAPAA is the peak industry body for the most significant industry directly "tackling" mental health in the workplace. With a history spanning over 30 years, we have a rigorous constitution which sees our members held to the highest level of service standards. Collaboration between the government and EAPAA would help both parties achieve the desired outcomes of this inquiry. The government is seeking to reduce the impact of mental health on the economy, and EAPAA is seeking to protect our industry and the wellbeing of Australians through ensuring the EAP industry is only participated in by adequate professional providers. Through education to industry and legislating the need for EAPAA membership to participate in providing EAP services in Australia, there is an opportunity to see the confidence and investment expand from Industry and an already in place industry help government "beat" mental health in this country.

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