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STANDING COMMITTEE ON
HEALTH AND COMMUNITY
WELLBEING

ORYGEN SUBMISSION

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Orygen welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing inquiry and review of current health assessment programs in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) for children and young people.

ABOUT ORYGEN

Orygen is the world's leading research and knowledge translation organisation focusing on mental ill-health in young people. At Orygen, our leadership and staff work to deliver cutting-edge research, policy development, innovative clinical services, and evidence-based training and education to ensure that there is continuous improvement in the treatments and care provided to young people experiencing mental ill-health.

Orygen conducts clinical research, runs clinical services (five headspace centres), supports the professional development of the youth mental health workforce and provides policy advice relating to young people's mental health. Our current research strengths include: early psychosis, mood disorders, personality disorders, functional recovery, suicide prevention, online interventions, neurobiology and health economics.

IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL HEALTH

Lifetime mental ill-health onsets predominantly between the ages of 12 and 25 years, with three-quarters of people who will experience mental ill-health during their lifetime having an initial experience during this stage of their life.(1) Mental ill-health accounts for 45 percent of the overall burden of disease among young people.(2) Untreated, mental ill-health can lead to poorer health, social, education and employment outcomes. This impact can last for decades, during what should be a young person's transition to adulthood and prime years of social and economic participation.

To enable to early access to mental health care it is important that screening is available to identify emerging symptoms that support help-seeking and provide pathways to care. Screening needs to be available in a range of settings where young people live and participate in activities. Screening processes and tools need to be appropriate to the setting and associated staff.

RECOMMENDATION

Mental health needs to be considered by the Standing Committee as a specific aspect of screening and health assessment alongside those identified in the Terms of Reference.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Terms of Reference for the Standing Committee include identification and review of the adequacy, availability and implementation of screening and health assessments programs and processes for young people in the ACT. In addition to existing processes and programs for mental health screening in the ACT health settings Orygen have identified opportunities to improve screening in education settings.

HEALTH

The ACT has a central telephone point for access to mental health services through Access Mental Health. This service can provide help and direction to appropriate services.

Primary care

General Practitioners can provide screening for mental ill-health for young people who present with symptoms or are help-seeking. headspace services also provide screening for young people who present.

Hospitals

The ACT has documented procedures for screening and referral of young people who present at emergency departments for mental health symptoms. If a crisis assessment and treatment team response is not required, young people are to be referred (between 9 am and 5 pm) to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. Outside of this time, the hospital is responsible for determining treatment priority. If psychological screening is to be undertaken, a young person's consent is required.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

Young people referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services are screened by clinical staff. Screening for psychosis will be undertaken if symptoms are present.

EDUCATION

Most young people up to the age of 18 years spend a large part of their time at school and many over this age continue with vocational training or tertiary education. This contact time provides an opportunity to promote social and emotional wellbeing, raise awareness of mental ill-health and monitor emergent or potential symptoms in students. Staff awareness and brief screening options provide an opportunity for early identification and pathways to appropriate services.

Schools

Schools and teaching staff in the ACT have access to the national BeYou social and emotional wellbeing promotion program. The program provides resources for teacher awareness including what signs to look for and how to support young people who experience mental ill-health. The BeYou program includes an Action Team component that supports staff with social and emotional wellbeing leadership roles in schools.

The ACT's School Youth Health Nurse Program focuses on health promotion. The role supports whole-of-school approaches to wellbeing in high schools to support student transition to adulthood.

RECOMMENDATION

The Standing Committee should consider how the School Youth Health Nurse Program could be integrated with the BeYou Action Teams to better support teaching staff to identify mental health symptoms. Training for nurses in brief mental health screening tools could be provided to inform school support responses for students and their families.

Vocational training and tertiary education

Young people undertaking vocational training or tertiary education do so at a life stage that includes more independence and responsibility. Teaching staff do not have the same level of contact as at high school, requiring different approaches to providing safe and supportive mental health services and environments.

At Canberra University, psychological services are available to all enrolled students. The university's Student Mental Health Support Policy focuses on communication and training teaching staff. The Australian National University provides face-to-face consultations and digital supports for students.

Digital supports include peer support through the TalkCampus app and e-couch, an online mental health self-help service. The platform includes a screening quiz.

In 2018 the Australian Government funded Orygen to develop an Australian University Mental Health Framework, after the absence of national guidance to universities was identified in an early policy report (*Under the Radar*). The Framework was released in December 2020 and sets out six principles to guide universities in providing mentally healthy settings that support students to thrive educationally and personally.

The Productivity Commission Mental Health inquiry found that people in vocational training report higher levels of psychological distress than university students.⁽³⁾ While Registered Training Organisations provide support services to assist students to successfully complete their qualification, mental health support is not always identified or addressed in assistance and support resources or services. The Productivity Commission has recommended that guidance for vocational sector needs to be developed on best meeting students' mental health needs (Recommendation 6). Action is needed to examine mental health culture and supports within the vocational sector in a similar process to the university sector.

RECOMMENDATION

The Standing Committee should recommend the ACT government consult the vocational sector (public and private) on the applicability of the University Framework principles and guidance to these settings. This process should report to the ACT government on the best approach for either adapting the Framework or developing a new guidance document for the vocational sector.

CONTACT DETAILS

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