Building mental health workforce vital to accessing care, new survey shows

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A new snapshot Australian survey of mental health consumers and carers released on World Mental Health Day indicates continuing difficulty and frustration in accessing appropriate mental health care.

CEO of the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses, Kim Ryan, said accessing appropriate care can be difficult for a variety of reasons, not least of all having a skilled mental health workforce.

"Mental health nurses play a critical role in addressing both the physical and mental health needs of consumers," said Ms Ryan.

This year’s World Mental Health Day theme 'Mental health and long term illness: The need for continued and integrated care.' captures the inextricable link between mental and physical well-being.

Mental health clients have a life expectancy of 18 to 20 years less than the general population, and this is largely related to significantly higher rates of physical illness.

"In the 21st century this is unacceptable. We will not be able to reduce these alarming statistics unless we have a nursing workforce with a solid foundation in and understanding of mental health," said Ms Ryan.

"It is accepted that GPs address certain mental health conditions and know when to refer to a psychiatrist - we need the same system in nursing. Mental health nurses hold additional qualifications in mental health just as psychiatrists hold additional qualifications in psychiatry. We need to build a specialist mental health nursing workforce to complement and support existing nursing services."

A huge 97.8% of survey respondents agreed that the government needs to invest more in building the mental health workforce to properly address Australia’s future mental health needs.

“There is no substitute for a mental health nurse to provide whole of person centred care, addressing both the mental and physical aspects of illness,” said Ms Ryan.

“The public deserves access to this level of health care."

One in three consumers (36.7%) ranked a mental health nurse as the most important person in helping with their mental health out of all of their personal and professional support networks.

The new Mental Health Nurse of the Year, Deborah Nelson, said that increasingly, mental health care professionals are seeing people with chronic physical health issues - such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease and obesity - and mental health problems.
“Death rates are 39% higher in cancer patients who have received a diagnosis of depression,” said Ms Nelson.

“A mental health nurse will work in collaboration with other health care professionals and in partnership with their patient to achieve optimum physical and mental wellbeing.

“We need to insist all nurses have appropriate education and clinical experience in mental health; we need to do it for our patients.”

Ms Nelson is Area Nursing Director for South Metropolitan Area Health Services, Mental Health, in Perth. She was awarded the profession’s highest honour last month.

Note to editors:

Please find attached a fact sheet outlining the key findings of the survey.

For more information or interviews:

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