MEDIA RELEASE

Blanket decision to lock mental health units a draconian step backwards

The Australian College of Mental Health Nurses (ACMHN) joins the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists’ (RANZCP) in condemning the recent announcement by Queensland Health to introduce ‘lock-up’ security measures to all adult mental health hospital inpatient facilities in Queensland, and the expansion of the use of ankle bracelets.

This week, Queensland Health ordered the State’s 16 mental health inpatient facilities to be secured, and a new ‘locked-door’ policy to be adopted effective 15 December 2013.

“We fully understand the need for safety and security, but a decision to lock all mental health units, as a knee jerk reaction to address issues of absconding, is a retrograde and draconian solution. It seems that no consideration has been given to the rights of those who are voluntarily admitted for treatment and care”, says Adjunct Associate Professor Kim Ryan, CEO of the ACMHN.

“We need to be working towards a mental health system that supports people with mental illness to live rich and meaningful lives. The Newman government can’t cut costs and pare back services, and not expect there to be a consequence. The cost of installing locks and electronic security could be better spent providing more support and staffing to the units”, said Adj. Assoc. Prof Ryan.

“We also need to continue to address stigma associated with mental health issues; the media surrounding the decision by Queensland Health has inferred that all people with mental health issues are a risk to themselves or others – this is simply not the case”, Adj. Assoc. Prof. Ryan said.

Dr Murray Patton, President of the RANZCP, says these plans go against the principles of least restrictive care. “For patients, being locked into a ward is affiliated with more anger, irritation and depression, hardly the goals of the mental health system”.

We are calling on Dr Michael Cleary, Queensland Health's deputy director-general who ordered the security upgrade, to reverse this decision and establish a process of consultation with the mental health units regarding the actions being taken to address incidents of absconding.

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