

31 July 2020

Parliament of Victoria
Public Accounts and Estimates Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

By online submission

Dear Committee members,

Re: Inquiry into the Victorian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists Victorian Branch (RANZCP Vic Branch) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee on the response to COVID-19 in Victoria.

The RANZCP is the principal organisation representing the medical specialty of psychiatry in Australia and New Zealand and is responsible for training, educating and representing psychiatrists on policy issues. The RANZCP Victorian Branch has over 1600 members, including more than 1100 qualified psychiatrists and around 400 members who are training to qualify as psychiatrists. The RANZCP partners with people with lived experience, through the Community Collaboration Committee and our community member on the RANZCP Victorian Branch Committee. Carer and consumer representation is woven into the fabric of the RANZCP and helps to ensure the RANZCP considers the needs, values and views of the community throughout its work.

The recent pandemic and bushfires have emphasised the significance of mental health in all aspects of life and particularly in times of collective difficulty. Mental health services and psychosocial support are essential to ensuring good mental health throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The Victorian government focus on mental health throughout the pandemic has been positive. This response has included funding announcements to continue the program of reform set out in the Interim Report from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, as well as ongoing engagement with the RANZCP Victorian Branch on relevant issues.

Mental health throughout COVID-19

The mental health impacts of COVID-19 are likely to be significant and far-reaching, impacting people with pre-existing mental health conditions as well as people who have never experienced mental ill-health. The RANZCP Victorian Branch notes that the ongoing economic impacts of COVID-19 are likely to be significant drivers of demand for mental support, given strong evidence that people experiencing financial hardship are at greater risk of mental health problems [1]. The financial impacts of COVID-19 are also likely to worsen once current support measures, such as Jobseeker and Jobkeeper, conclude. A focus on alleviating the economic burden of COVID-19 should factor in the mental health impacts of

financial hardship and economic disruption.

There is a strong need for further data on mental health presentations, as they relate to COVID-19, in order to drive service planning. It is expected that there will be a rise in high-prevalence mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety, and an ensuing increase in mental health presentations at primary services. However, further data is needed to confirm this and plan ahead. On this basis, the RANZCP Victorian Branch recommends the development of a data system to track increased demand from COVID-19 – including recording where COVID-19 has been a contributing factor to a patient presentation.

The RANZCP Victorian Branch acknowledges that certain groups may be more vulnerable to the mental health impacts relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. We note that substance use remains an ongoing concern throughout COVID-19, and requires a concerted public health response and funding for treatment services [2]. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated issues around family violence and ability of those experiencing family violence accessing support services. An increase in services available for people experiencing family violence should be considered. In addition to the groups addressed above, it is further suggested that specific consideration be given to mental health and wellbeing support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people involved in the justice system, and older people. Public health messaging should be tailored to these groups, with consideration of health literacy in the across diverse groups and the general population.

Health workforce and mental health service delivery

The continuing challenges of COVID-19 may represent an ongoing risk to the wellbeing of the health workforce, and it is predicted that burnout among health workers will be a significant challenge in the coming months and years. In order to limit these impacts, health services must be appropriately resourced and mental health professionals provided with a range of supports. Further, access to mental health services in regional areas of Victoria remains a concern.

It has been widely noted that adaptation to COVID-19 within the mental health sector has been characterised by a shift towards telehealth services. The impacts of this shift should be thoroughly evaluated, and consideration be given to the optimal balance of telehealth and face-to-face services as restrictions are lifted across Victoria. It is important that individuals seeking mental health treatment and support can access care through suitable means appropriate to their needs. To ensure this, psychiatrists and other health workers must have access to the required infrastructure and guidance to undertake telehealth services.

As more data becomes available, it is important that the Victorian Government's response continues to adapt to ensure the best outcomes during the recovery phase. The RANZCP Victorian Branch continues to engage with the Victorian Government to consider how best to support the mental health of Victorians throughout this difficult time.

To discuss any of the issues raised in this letter and submission, please contact Lily Edwards, Policy and Advocacy Adviser via [REDACTED] or by phone on [REDACTED]



Yours sincerely



Dr Kerry Rubin
Chair, Victorian Branch Committee

References

1. Kiely, K.M., et al., *How financial hardship is associated with the onset of mental health problems over time*. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*, 2015. **50**(6): p. 909-918.
2. Kar, S.K., et al., *COVID-19 pandemic and addiction: Current problems and future concerns*. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 2020.