

### Mental Health in rural Australia

#### THE FACTS

- **Mental health is more than just lack of mental illness.** It is defined by the World Health Organisation as “a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”<sup>1</sup>
- **Mental illness is common.** One in four Australian adults experience a mental health problem or substance use disorder each year<sup>2</sup>
- **Suicide rates are higher in rural areas.** Although there is a similar prevalence of mental disorders in both urban and rural areas, there are higher rates of suicide in rural and remote areas, particularly in males<sup>2-4</sup>. Men in remote areas are 1.7 times as likely and in very remote areas are 2.6 times as likely to die from suicide compared to men in urban areas<sup>5</sup>
- **Rural life has unique stressors.** People living in rural areas face distinctive problems, such as unbuffered exposure to drought and other natural disasters<sup>2, 4, 6, 7</sup> as well as depressed agricultural commodity prices
- **Population decline is negatively impacting inland rural areas.** Although there has been population growth in many coastal and mountain towns, population decline has occurred in inland agricultural regions due to out-migration of young people<sup>8</sup>. This is the result of centralization of the private and public sector (e.g. schools, banks, and hospitals) to urban areas. These events have caused increased unemployment, falling house prices and entrapment for those remaining in these rural areas who can not afford to move elsewhere with the price they would get for selling their house
- **Poorer access to psychiatric help.** These conditions are combined with isolation from health services, with 91% of psychiatrists in Australia practicing solely in urban areas<sup>9</sup> and only 12% of psychologists practicing outside urban areas<sup>4</sup>

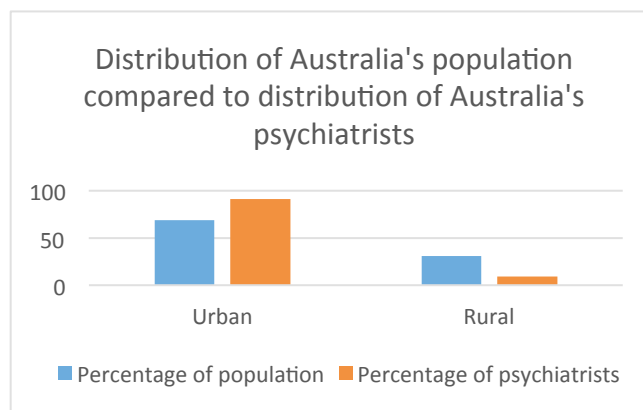


Figure 1: Distribution of Australia's population compared to distribution of Australia's psychiatrists. One third of Australia's population lives in a rural area but only one in ten psychiatrists practices in a rural area<sup>10</sup>

- **Fewer GPs, less people accessing them.** Even though people from rural areas depend more on GPs for mental health care, the number of GPs per capita plummets in rural and remote areas<sup>11</sup>. People in rural and remote areas are also less likely to seek help from their GP for mental health problems, which has been proposed to be due to distance, financial barriers, stoicism, prevailing stigma around mental illness, and fear of gossip in smaller communities<sup>11</sup>

#### THE OPINIONS

##### Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP)

- Recommends a range of strategies that aim to give rural communities access to a full range of mental health services close to where they live
- These strategies include: increased numbers of medical students with a rural background through enrolment targets, investing in funding and training centres that allow psychiatrist trainees to undertake their training entirely in a rural area, more support to psychiatrist trainees in rural and remote settings, the funding of

grants to improve the number of psychiatrists remaining in rural areas such as access to professional development and financial incentives, more flexible (fly-in fly-out) models of work, and greater resourcing for telepsychiatry

[https://www.ranzcp.org/Files/Resources/College\\_Statements/Position\\_Statements/PS-65-FPOA-Rural-psychiatry-\(Feb-2015\).aspx](https://www.ranzcp.org/Files/Resources/College_Statements/Position_Statements/PS-65-FPOA-Rural-psychiatry-(Feb-2015).aspx)

### **Australian Medical Association (AMA)**

- Any Australian with a mental illness should have access to quality mental health care
- Immediate priorities for government action include improved access to community-based mental health care services in rural communities, with the services customized to specifically meet local needs, as well as rural hospitals and general practices that have enough resources to give a timely and effective care to patients with a mental illness after hours  
<https://ama.com.au/position-statement/mental-health-2011>
- A priority area is development of an MBS item for telehealth consultations  
[https://ama.com.au/sites/default/files/documents/AMA\\_submission\\_2014\\_review\\_of\\_mental\\_health\\_services\\_and\\_programs.pdf](https://ama.com.au/sites/default/files/documents/AMA_submission_2014_review_of_mental_health_services_and_programs.pdf)

### **NSW Farmers' Association**

- The NSW Farmers Mental Health Network Blueprint recognizes that pathways to health are needed to combat the pathways to breakdown occurring in rural farming communities.
- This includes improved access to drug and alcohol programs to combat alcohol misuse; mental health first aid training to combat lack of awareness of mental illness and services available; lobbying NSW Health to improve the number and quality of services available to rural NSW to combat clinical depression and other mental health disorders; and funding and public education about crisis lines to combat suicide attempts.  
<http://www.aghealth.org.au/blueprint/blueprint.html>

### **Royal Australian College of General Practice (RACGP)**

- GPs and healthcare teams currently have to work with a number of different supports which are often narrow in their scope and work in isolation of other supports
- Priorities for action include integration of existing funding; a reduction of the distance burden in rural areas by investment in policy which facilitates innovative localized solutions; stronger investments in training the existing workforce; and a review of MBS item numbers for mental health  
<http://www.racgp.org.au/download/Documents/Rural/RACGP-National-Rural-Faculty-NRF-Position-Statement-on-the-provision-of-mental-health-services-in-rural-Australia.PDF>

## **HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

- Become involved in Blue Week to learn more about mental health
- Contact AMSA Rural Health (<https://www.amsa.org.au/initiatives/ruralhealth/>) or the ANU Rural Medical Society (<http://arms.asn.au>) to find out about education and advocacy opportunities for rural mental health

## **REFERENCES**

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