

Rural and remote mental health: Better access for Queenslanders

Introduction

The Queensland Mental Health Commission (the Commission) was established to drive system-wide reform of the mental health and drug and alcohol systems in Queensland. As part of its legislative mandate the Commission will promote the best interests of people living with mental illness or problematic substance use as well as their families, carers and support persons. This mandate includes a specific focus on the unique and diverse circumstances of individuals living in rural and remote communities.

Our actions

One of the Commission's first priorities is to develop a whole-of-government strategic plan to identify priorities and commitments to help improve mental health and minimise the impact of substance misuse across the state. The strategic plan must ensure due consideration and attention is given to addressing mental health issues experienced by many rural Queenslanders. To this end the Commission held regional stakeholder forums in Toowoomba, Rockhampton, Cairns and Townsville in September and October 2013 to inform the strategic plan's development. Additionally, the Queensland Mental Health Commissioner, Lesley van Schoubroeck, met with local organisations and networks to hear their concerns and proposed solutions for making the systems better.

In January 2014 the Commission engaged Associate Professor Jagmohan Gilhotra to focus on (among other issues) what better access to rural and remote mental health services would look like, and to identify with key stakeholders solutions to known impediments to service delivery. Currently also working as a consultant psychiatrist in Toowoomba, he will utilise knowledge from both his clinical practice as well as experience from his former role as Queensland's Chief Psychiatrist.

The Queensland Mental Health and Drug Advisory Council (the Council) will be constituted in early 2014. Members of the Council will be briefed and have input into this work area.

Emerging issues

Through our consultation process access to mental health and alcohol and other drug services has been identified as a main issue for rural and remote Queenslanders. Several specific issues have emerged and will be a focus for the Commission to explore. They are:

- the use of **telehealth** (video consultation) in improving access, especially after hours, and the examination of protocols in its use;
- **coordinated** service delivery with cross sectoral, cross discipline collaboration;
- a range of issues with **transport** with one example being the unnecessary transport of people who could access mental health or drug and alcohol services via alternative means such as telehealth;
- the availability of **resources** in both clinical and non-clinical services.

The Commission will work with the Hospital and Health Services to look at these emerging issues in detail as well as any other relevant issues brought to the Commission's attention as the strategic plan is developed. The Commission will also work with the Department of Health and members of the Statewide Rural and Remote Clinical Network to discuss implementation of the *Queensland Rural and Remote Health Service Framework* which was released in mid-2013.

In recognition of the diversity of rural Queensland and the unique circumstances within each community, the Commission intends to conduct further visits throughout rural Queensland in early 2014 to inform the strategic plan.

Updates will continue to be provided on the Commission's website — www.qmhc.qld.gov.au