

A Global Call to Action

Media Release

*International Equally Well Alliance Global Call to Action
to improve vaccine equity for people living with mental illness and addiction use disorders*

Background Information

People living with mental illness die on average 20 years earlier than the rest of the population.

For instance, while the incidence of cancer is the same or lower than the general population women with mental illness are 6 times more likely to die of breast cancer, and men 5 times more likely to die of prostate cancer.

Due to discrimination, stigma and diagnostic overshadowing (where physical health conditions are often overlooked), people living with mental illness are twice as likely to die prematurely.

Over 10 times more people with mental illness die early due to physical health conditions than die due to suicide.

Many of the causes of early death are entirely preventable through early screening and preventive health measures such as vaccination.

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Equally Well Australia launches Global Call to Action to improve vaccines access for people with mental illness

Key messages

- The attention of the COVID-19 risk highlights that people living with mental illness and substance use disorders have been missing out on access to other vaccines for preventable diseases such as influenza, tuberculosis and hepatitis for decades.
- A [Global Call to Action](#) launched today is mobilising an international effort to save lives for people living with mental illness and substance use disorders.
- People living with mental illness have almost 5 times the rate of being hospitalised and 4 times the rate of premature death due to of vaccine preventable conditions.
- People living with mental illness have over 7 times the rate of vaccine preventable hospital bed days.
- Proactively offering vaccination to people with serious mental illness would save \$84 million in hospital costs each year in Australia.
- Systemic failures, diagnostic overshadowing (seeing only mental not physical health issues), invisibility of careers, stigma and discrimination are contributing to global vaccine inequity.

Background

During mental health month, an international alliance of people living with mental illness, scientists, public health and community leaders, is calling for urgent action towards vaccine equity for people living with mental illness.

In launching the [Global Call to Action](#), the International Equally Well Alliance is targeting the inequities in health systems across the world that see people living with mental illness twice as likely to be hospitalised, experience long term effects or die from COVID-19 and at four times the risk of contracting and dying from other preventable diseases like influenza tuberculosis, as a report in the Lancet Psychiatry and in Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences has found. Equally Well is a group of individuals and groups focused on working together to improve the physical health outcomes of people living with mental health and addiction issues. The Global Call to Action is being co-led by [Equally Well Australia](#), [Equally Well UK](#) and [Equally Well New Zealand](#) with support from alliance members in 12 countries through Europe, Asia and the United States. The aim of this campaign is also to expand the network of Call to Action supporters.

Comments

Spokesperson for Equally Well Australia and Charles Sturt University Professor in Management Professor Russell Roberts said that equitable access to vaccines is a fundamental human right.

“The World Health Organisation (WHO) has recommended countries take proactive measures to prioritise those who are vulnerable and socially disadvantaged when it comes to vaccine access and yet we see in many countries around the world the mentally ill and people living with substance use disorders, excluded or delayed from getting the support they need to make informed choice around vaccine programs.

“The success of the COVID-19 vaccine has showed how targeted and supported vaccine programs can save lives, reduce pressure on the health care system and save money in preventable hospitalisations.”

In Australia, without the need for any additional resources or staff, proactively offering vaccination to people with serious mental illness would save \$84 million in hospital costs each year.

“However, we acknowledge there is still some work to do on vaccine equity in many developing countries where statistics of preventable deaths are much higher than the western world. This is why global action is needed”, Professor Roberts said.

The Global Call to Action also recognises the need for health systems and policy shifts to recognise the vital role carers take in the lives of many living with mental illness who are often invisible in the systems they are aiming to help their loved ones navigate.

“The key is in removing stigma around attitudes towards people living with mental illness and substance use disorders and taking proactive approaches from policy makers and clinical health practitioners, to reach out to those who may be eligible. Contrary to common belief the rate of vaccine hesitancy and vaccine acceptance in people with mental illness is the same as the rest of the population”, Professor Roberts said.

“This is not about coercion. It is about offering people living with mental illness information and the opportunity to decide to be inoculated or not. Respecting freedom of choice and personal autonomy is an underlying principle of good mental health support.

“The right information will enable people to make informed choices. There is every hope with increased attention and action, that we will achieve real improvements in people lives so that the chances for a bright and healthy future for people with mental illness and substance use disorders, can be as equal to anyone else in the community”, Professor Roberts said.

Signing the pledge

Individuals and organisations interested in supporting the [Global Call to Action](#) on Equitable Vaccine Access can make the pledge and see the full declaration on the campaign website <https://www.equallywell.org.au/declaration/>.

Media notes

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References

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