

**Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
PFAS Sub-committee**

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH PORTFOLIO

Inquiry into the remediation of PFAS related impacts in and around Defence bases
Monday 24 February 2020

Topic: Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS)

Type of Question: Spoken, Proof Committee Hansard, 24 February 2020.

Senator: Ms Meryl Swanson MP and Senator Sam McMahon

Question 1: Mental health services and research being conducted on PFAS and mental health

a) Information on mental health services currently being offered in PFAS affected communities, including uptake of counselling services

Answer:

People in the PFAS investigation areas of Williamtown, Oakey and Katherine, continue to have access to funded dedicated mental health and counselling services. Support services can be accessed by contacting the local Primary Health Networks (PHNs), or visiting a General Practitioner (GP) who can refer the person to an appropriate mental health and counselling service. Under current funding agreements, the three relevant PHNs are funded to provide mental health and counselling services for Williamtown, Oakey and Katherine until 30 June 2021.

As at 31 December 2019, PHNs reported the following uptake of face to face mental health and counselling services:

	Williamtown	Oakey	Katherine	Total
Number of Clients	387	127	3	517
Number of Sessions*	1554	377	4	1935

*Number of sessions conducted that have been charged to the PHN.

It is noted that the dedicated mental health and counselling services were made available in Katherine approximately 12 months later than Williamtown and Oakey, after it became a PFAS investigation area.

The Australian Government also funded a telephone and online counselling service, called *Support Now*, for people affected by PFAS contamination. Coinciding with the ending of the Voluntary Blood Testing Program, the Support Now service closed on 30 June 2019. The service provided about 100 counselling sessions between being established in April 2017 and closing in June 2019. Of the sessions provided, 11 clients identified as having lived/worked in Williamtown, NSW; 6 identified as having lived/worked in Oakey, Queensland; and 5

identified as having lived/worked in Katherine, Northern Territory. The remaining clients either did not consent to providing their postcode or did not identify as having lived/worked in any of the investigation areas.

b) Investment in research on the mental health impacts of PFAS.

Answer:

To help us better understand the potential human health effects of exposure to PFAS, the Government is funding an epidemiological study being conducted by the Australian National University (ANU) (ANU Study).

The ANU Study has five main components over two phases. Phase one (components one and two) is now complete and Phase two comprises a Focus Groups Study, Cross-sectional Survey and Blood Serum Study, and a Data Linkage Study. The Focus Groups Study component gathered a range of social and health related experiences and perceptions, including both physical and mental health concerns, associated with living in an area affected by PFAS contamination. The findings from the Focus Groups Study demonstrated that mental health is an important outcome to further investigate in these areas.

In the Cross-sectional Survey and Blood Serum Study component, individuals who had their blood collected through the Voluntary Blood Testing Program and agreed to participate in the ANU study were invited to participate in the cross-sectional survey from October 2019. Individuals from three selected comparison towns will also be invited to complete the survey and provide a blood sample for PFAS. This will enable the ANU to examine the blood test results, along with health effects and other concerns.

The ANU has included mental health scales in their survey that measure distress and anxiety in particular. The survey also looks at other health concerns that the community have about exposure to PFAS, including finances, stigma, uncertainty about the future and health-seeking behaviours such as seeing a GP, accessing mental health services and changes in lifestyle habits like exercise, smoking and alcohol consumption.

The results of the ANU Study are expected to be published by the end of 2020. It is anticipated that the results from the ANU Study will be broadly applicable to other identified PFAS contaminated sites.

Question 2: Clarification of advice on the behaviour of PFAS contamination in cattle

This question from Senator Faruqi will be addressed by the PFAS Taskforce, which sits within the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment.