

Inspire
inspiring young people

in conjunction with

ayac Australian Youth
Affairs Coalition

Joint submission in response to
*Commonwealth Funding and Administration
of Mental Health Services Inquiry*

Aug 5 2011

The Inspire Foundation

The Inspire Foundation is a national non-profit mental health organisation with the mission to help young people lead happier lives. Established in 1996 in direct response to Australia's then escalating rates of youth suicide, we were the first organisation in Australia to utilise the internet to deliver a mental health service. Our flagship program, ReachOut.com, is a proven, effective, early intervention service that engages over 500 000 young people aged between 14-25 every year.

We are also the lead partner in the Cooperative Research Centre for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing ('the CRC'), a \$100 million research consortium that launched on July 1, 2011. The 63 partners in the CRC are drawn from a range of sectors including academia, business and mental health, and together share the vision for a society that embraces the potential of technology to connect communities and enable all young Australians to grow up safe, happy, healthy and resilient. The research program will develop an International framework that explores the potential of technologies, the role it plays in the lives of young people and how its potential can be harnessed to address many of the major social challenges facing young people.

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Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is Australia's non-government youth affairs peak body, which seeks to represent young people aged 12-25 and the sector that supports them.

AYAC represents a growing membership of State and Territory Youth Peak Bodies, National Youth Organisations, researchers, policy makers and young people themselves, who are all passionate about creating an Australian community that supports and promotes the positive development of young people.

AYAC aims to:

- Provide a body broadly representative of the issues and interests of young people and the youth affairs field in Australia
- Advocate for a united Australia which respects and values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, promotes human rights, and provides justice for all
- Represent the rights and interests of young people in Australia, at both a national and an international level
- Promote the elimination of poverty and to promote the well being of young Australians, with a particular focus on those who are disadvantaged.
- Recognise the diversity of Australian society, to promote the cultural, social, economic, political, environmental and spiritual interests and participation of young people in all aspects of society
- Advocate for, assist with and support the development of policy positions on issues affecting young people and the youth affairs field, and to provide policy advice, perspectives and advocacy to Governments and the broader community
- Facilitate co-ordination and co-operation within the youth affairs field

AYAC and its members are dedicated to working for and with young people and seek to ensure they have access to mechanisms, which allow them to make decisions about issues that affect them in the Australian community.

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Executive Summary

Over the last 12 months we have been pleased to see the greater priority being placed on mental health by the Federal Government, and especially welcome the injection of \$1.5 billion in new money for mental health that was outlined in the Federal Budget. We were particularly encouraged by the prioritization of funding for services for children and young people - a wise investment in view of the fact that 75 per cent of mental illness has its onset before the age of 24¹.

As welcome as this increased funding is, however, it must be considered to be only a first step towards redressing the long-term underfunding of mental health. Furthermore, we would caution that any additional monies must be invested wisely, into the sorts of policies and programs that are able to immediately and effectively support the greatest number of people for the lowest cost.

Indeed, as we look to the future there remain a number of key challenges to be addressed, some of which include:

- reducing the appallingly high suicide rate amongst young men;
- delivering services to Aboriginal people and others who are socially and geographically isolated; and
- ensuring there is a suitably trained and plentiful mental health workforce.

To this end, the following submission focuses on possible ways to address these challenges under one of the terms of reference, namely:

- h): the impact of online services for people with a mental illness, with particular regard to those living in rural and remote locations and other hard to reach groups.

¹ Kessler, RC., Bergland, P., Demler, O., Jin, R. and Walters, EE. (2005) Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 62: p.593-602

The impact of online services for people with a mental illness, with particular regard to those living in rural and remote locations and other hard to reach groups

'One of the biggest challenges for mental health services is making genuine connections with young people – in particular, with young men and with those who are socially isolated, either geographically or because of their personal circumstances. Technology facilitates those connections.'

Prof Ian Hickie, AM MD FRANZCP, Executive Director of the Brain & Mind Research Institute, University of Sydney

Technology has significantly changed the way in which Australia's 4.2 million young people aged 12 to 25 interact with one another and the world around them. Almost all young Australians are online with 90% of 16 – 29 years olds using the internet daily for a range of activities including obtaining information and establishing and interacting with their social networks². Mission Australia's annual Survey of Young Australians shows that the proportion of young people who view the Internet as their top source of advice and support grows strongly from year to year.

On the other hand, what hasn't changed much for young people is their rate of help-seeking for mental health difficulties. The research shows that whilst one in four young people aged 16 to 24 will experience a mental disorder³, 70% of those same young people are unable or unwilling to receive clinical care⁴. This problem is further compounded in the case of young men and those living in rural and remote areas of Australia, a reality that is borne out in the high rates of suicide amongst those populations.

It is therefore critical that priority is given to investing in the kinds of services that young people find comfortable, safe and easy to use. Inspire's experience in delivering ReachOut.com provides one case study that online services meet that criteria and make a positive difference to young people experiencing a mental illness.

Last year ReachOut.com helped 450,000 young Australians, over 32 per cent of whom live in a rural or regional location. 75 per cent of these young people were found to be experiencing high to very high levels of distress, and many were suicidal. This suggests that ReachOut.com is reaching young people who despite feeling extremely distressed, are not yet ready to access traditional phone-based or face-to-face services. Encouragingly, Inspire's User Profiling Survey also found that the service was having a positive impact on mental health literacy – an important precursor to help-seeking. In addition, young people using ReachOut.com reported feeling less socially isolated and better informed about how and where to get help. Thus ReachOut.com - along with other online services - form a critical part of a young person's pathway to appropriate care and play a crucial role in reaching the millions of young people currently missing out on traditional services.

There are a number of other advantages to online service delivery that further underscore their importance in a comprehensive mental health response. Available 24 hours a day and

² Nielson (2010a) The Australian Internet & Technology Report – Edition 12, The Nielson Company.

³ Moffitt, TE., Caspi, A., Taylor, A., Kokaua, J., Milne, BJ., Polanczyk, G. and Poulton, R. (2010) *How common are common mental disorders? Evidence that lifetime prevalence rates are doubled by prospective versus retrospective ascertainment.* Psychological Medicine, 40: p.899–909

⁴ Rickwood, DJ., Deane, FP. and Wilson, CJ. (2007) When and how do young people seek professional help for mental health problems? Medical Journal of Australia, 187(7)

able to absorb huge demand at little cost, online services are an ideal complement to other reforms in mental health. Furthermore, they are comparatively inexpensive, with the cost of online health delivery up to 50 times more cost effective for governments than traditional mental health services. And with the roll out of the national broadband network, it is likely that further opportunities will emerge to develop and deliver new methods of service delivery that can reach and engage large numbers of people at low cost.

□ “At 15 years old, I hated the world, I hated myself. I was trapped in a deep dark hole of depression. I was miserable, scared and felt so alone. I withdrew from life. I could not turn to my friends or my family. I felt like I had no-one except for my one wish. What I dreamed and wished for every day made my home life and depression bearable. It was something I clung on to. It was my hope. My wish was that when I went to sleep I would not wake up in the morning and that I would no longer have to face another day.

When people ask me how I came to be involved in Inspire or how I found ReachOut.com, I usually just answer “I stumbled upon it on the internet”. This is true, but it’s not the whole truth. I have finally come to a point in my life where I can answer without the of judgment and no longer feel the shame or guilt.

The day I came across ReachOut, I was searching for a way to end my life. ‘Suicide’, ‘quick’ and ‘easy’ were the three words I typed hoping I could find my exit from this world. Amongst my search results I found ReachOut.com. ReachOut.com is not just another website; I like to think of it as a journey.

I know for me, when I first started to engage with the site I mainly used fact sheets and stories to gain an understanding of what was happening to me. As time progressed I felt more and more comfortable and started to engage in a different way and started to use the online community forums, where I felt safe enough to explore the issues I faced, and other young people were able to provide support and encouragement. This eventually led me to seeking help in my community through counseling.

Today when I go to sleep I no longer wish that I will not wake up. In fact, I am excited about what the next day will bring.”

Stacey, 24, ReachOut.com Youth Ambassador

AYAC and The Inspire Foundation look forward to the findings of this Committee and to working with governments to ensure that accessible mental health services for children and young people are at the forefront of federal policy when considering the budget delivered in 2011.

We look forward to the findings of this inquiry and would welcome the opportunity to meet to discuss this further, particularly during hearings and consultations.