



24 September 2012

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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Dear Senators

Australia's domestic response to the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health report 'Closing the gap within a generation'

beyondblue, the national depression and anxiety initiative, appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry on Australia's response to the 'Closing the gap within a generation' report.

Fully implementing the recommendations of the 'Closing the gap' report will help the Australian Government to reduce health inequity and improve mental health and wellbeing. This is a critical component of reducing the impact and burden of depression and anxiety.

While mental health and wellbeing are determined by a range of multiple and interacting factors - including biological, psychological, environmental, social and cultural factors - it is the social determinants of health that have the greatest impact on the health of populations.^{1,2} Research consistently shows that the overall prevalence of common mental health disorders follows a social gradient, with higher rates associated with low income, insecure housing, limited education, recent unemployment, high-demand or low-control work, child abuse or neglect, poor neighbourhood conditions, and low social support.³ The World Health Organization (2010) describes the relationship between social determinants and mental health, and the need for action, as follows:

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“Put simply, mental disorders are inequitably distributed, as people who are socially and economically disadvantaged bear a disproportionate burden of mental disorders and their adverse consequences. A vicious cycle of disadvantage and mental disorder is the result of the dynamic interrelationship between them... Population-level interventions targeting social determinants of mental disorders are likely to exert small but, from a public health point of view, potentially important effects of population mental health, given the high prevalence of mental disorders.”⁴

Given the strong relationship between social determinants and mental health, it is important that the Senate Committee considers how the Government’s implementation of the ‘Closing the gap’ recommendations is impacting on mental health, as well as physical health.

There is evidence that the Government is adopting some of the ‘Closing the gap’ recommendations that benefit mental health and wellbeing. For example, the report recommends that Governments *“Commit to and implement a comprehensive approach to early life, building on existing child survival programmes and extending interventions in early life to include social/emotional and language/cognitive development”*, as part of efforts to ‘improve daily living conditions’.⁵ In line with this recommendation, the Australian Government is supporting the roll out of the ‘KidsMatter Primary’ program to 2,000 schools by mid 2014. This universal mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention framework, developed by *beyondblue*, the Department of Health and Ageing, the Australian Psychological Society, and Principals Australia, aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of primary school students; reduce mental health difficulties among students; and achieve greater support for students experiencing mental health difficulties. Through adopting a whole-school approach, the program has been demonstrated to effectively enhance school environments, and result in improvements in mental health and wellbeing, with the greatest changes observed in those students with the poorest mental health.

The delivery of the KidsMatter program is in line with the ‘Closing the gap’ recommendations, which suggests that some components of the ‘Closing the gap’ report may be informing Government policies and funding. However, it is critical that a social determinants of health approach underpins *all* Government policies and funding decisions, to achieve population-level improvements in mental health and wellbeing.

An effective way of incorporating a social determinants of health approach is to adopt a ‘Health in All Policies’ framework. ‘Health in All Policies’ is founded on the premise that *“government objectives are best achieved when all sectors include health and well-being as a key component of policy development.”*⁶ This approach requires a new form of governance, in which there is joined-up leadership within and across governments and across sectors.⁷ The South Australian Government is currently implementing a ‘Health in All Policies’ approach, and their learnings could inform the Australian Government’s adoption of a similar model.

Implementing the ‘Health in All Policies’ approach, and the recommendations of the ‘Closing the Gap’ report, provides an important opportunity for the Australian Government to make significant, population-level improvements in mental health and wellbeing.

Ultimately, a comprehensive, multisectoral, whole-of-government response to social determinants will reduce the burden of depression and anxiety disorders. *beyondblue* would welcome the opportunity to support the Government's implementation of the 'Closing the gap' recommendations.

Yours sincerely

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¹ Global Consortium for the Advancement of Promotion and Prevention in Mental Health. (2008). *The Melbourne charter for promoting mental health and preventing mental and behavioural disorders*. Margins to Mainstream: 5th World Conference on the Promotion of Mental Health and the Prevention of Mental and Behavioural Disorders, Melbourne.

² Department of Health South Australia (2010). *Health in all policies: background and practical guide*. Department of Health: Adelaide.

³ Fisher, M. & Baum, F. (2010). The social determinants of mental health: implications for research and health promotion. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 44, 1057 – 1063.

⁴ Patel, V., Lund, C., Hatherill, S., Plagerson, S., Corrigall, J., Funk, M & Fisher, A.J. (2010). Mental disorders: equity and social determinants. In E. Blas & A.S. Kurup (Eds.). *Equity, social determinants and public health programmes*. (pp. 115 – 134). Geneva: World Health Organization

⁵ Commission on Social Determinants of Health (2008). *Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health. Final Report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health*. Geneva: World Health Organization

⁶ World Health Organisation & Government of South Australia (2010). *Adelaide Statement on Health in All Policies*. Accessed online 5 September 2012:

http://www.who.int/social_determinants/hiap_statement_who_sa_final.pdf

⁷ World Health Organisation & Government of South Australia (2010). *Adelaide Statement on Health in All Policies*. Accessed online 5 September 2012:

http://www.who.int/social_determinants/hiap_statement_who_sa_final.pdf