



House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment

Inquiry into Mental Health and Workforce Participation 2011

Submission by the Black Dog Institute - April 2011

Background

The Black Dog Institute is a NSW based not-for-profit organisation focused on advancing research, clinical services, professional education and community awareness in mood disorders, including depression and bipolar disorder.

The Institute was launched in 2002 and is today recognised in Australia and internationally as a leading authority in the field of mood disorders. The Institute is affiliated with the Prince of Wales Hospital, Randwick and the University of New South Wales.

Building on over twenty years of research and clinical expertise in the assessment, diagnosis and management of mood disorders, the Institute aims to improve the lives of those affected, and in turn, the lives of their families and friends.

Our core business model is represented by four primary interactive streams:

- Research
- Clinical Services
- Professional Education and Training
- Community Programs

These streams are interdependent - clinical observation shapes research hypotheses, while research findings are filtered back into clinical management. This in turn shapes the content of evidence-based, accredited programs training programs for health professionals as well as being disseminated to the community.

Barriers for people with mental ill health in reaching their full potential through education, training and employment

Despite the success of large awareness campaigns for some mental illnesses (such as *beyondblue's* demystifying depression campaigns), **stigma** remains a significant barrier across gender, age and socioeconomic groups. This prevents individuals from seeking help for a mental health problem, and therefore there is a need for ongoing campaigns to continue to break down these stigmas across all aspects of mental health. A **lack of understanding and knowledge** about the signs, symptoms and common presentations of a mental illness contributes to the high level of undiagnosed and untreated mental illness. Untreated illness prevents an individual from being able to fully participate in any educational, training program or to work successfully in any workforce. **Education from employers and education /training providers** about the often chronic and fluctuating nature of

mental illness is needed to support individuals with a mental health problem to remain in training or in the workforce.

It is now well recognised that education aides recovery and improves prognosis. The **provision of the correct diagnosis, management plans** and access to **appropriate treatments** (biological, psychological, social and vocational) are all barriers that need Federal as well as State support and funding to address. As the first point of contact for those seeking help it is vital that all Australian General Practitioners (GPs) have **access to independent (non-pharmaceutical company sponsored) evidence based education and training** in order to update and up-skill on all current as well as the new and emerging treatment approaches for mental illnesses. Currently very little is provided by professional educational bodies and this can act as a significant barrier in GP education and de-stigmatisation.

Although outside the Black Dog Institute's area of expertise, we recognise individuals need to have **affordable, secure and safe housing**, and sufficient **financial means** to cover extra travel, medication and other treatment costs, on top of daily living costs in order to work and attend educational facilities.

Terms of Reference

In addressing the terms of reference, this submission consists of four recommendations to improve the capacity of individuals, families, community members, co-workers and employers to respond to the needs of people affected by mental illness.

The core of these recommendations is the need to improve access to high quality education and training for health professionals and other community providers in direct contact with those suffering from a mental illness, as well as increasing community awareness about mental illness. With the correct diagnosis, appropriate treatment and support, individuals with a mental health condition will be able to better manage their condition and be in a better position to seek and remain in employment.

Recommendation 1: Promote Positive Mental Health Awareness

A greater understanding and knowledge of mental health conditions can be achieved through stigma reduction campaigns, mental health training programs, and easily accessible resources to dispel the myths about mental illness. Stigma reduction campaigns need to stress that employees with mental illness are not a barrier to workplace productivity.

Strategies include:

- Providing resources and mental health education programs for organisations and the community to better understand mental health conditions and help reduce the stigma associated with mental illness;
- Educating employers, managers and human resource staff to understand responsibilities in relation to duty of care and supporting return to work strategies;

- Supporting and encouraging employers to recruit and retain staff with a mental illness;
- Ensuring that mental health education becomes a key focus area in schools, and embedding mental health education in the National Curriculum;
- Supporting programs which reach young people where they gather online, such as www.biteback.org.au, www.tuneinnotout.com, www.youthbeyondblue.com, reachout.com.au;
- Supporting e-Health tools such as *myCompass* - a free mobile tracker tool to help people self-manage the symptoms of mild to moderate depression;
- Building sustainable support networks and professional support for people living with a mental health condition; and
- Increasing investment in vocational rehabilitation and disability employment support services servicing individuals with mental illness.

Recommendation 2: Provide education and training for employers and employees to better understand the affect of mental health issues in the workplace

Through supportive leadership, employers can create workplace environments that minimise the impact of work-related stress, increase team morale and productivity. The Black Dog Institute supports initiatives for recruitment and retention of employees affected by mental health conditions, and for employers in creating supportive and flexible work environments.

Strategies include:

- Encouraging employers to provide flexible working arrangements for all staff (e.g. working from home, flexible start times, and working part-time options);
- Delivering mental health education programs for employers and managers to effectively recognise and manage staff affected by a mental health conditions;
- Providing support for staff to make it easier to disclose their condition and remain in employment;
- Supporting the provision of good mental health life skills, such as resilience, mindfulness and stress reduction strategies for staff to deal with stress in the workplace; and
- Implementing suitable return to work strategies with clear guidelines and ongoing support for employees affected by a mental health condition.

Recommendation 3: Support access to education and training for health professionals to improve the diagnosis and management of mental health conditions, especially in rural areas

Improving the skills and confidence of the medical and mental health workforce in addressing and managing mental health conditions substantially increases the likelihood that a sufferer will be able to receive timely and appropriate treatment, resulting in a quicker recovery and return to work.

With appropriate treatment, individuals with a mental health condition can manage their illness and function productively.

The Black Dog Institute encourages Federal and State support to increase the availability and access to diagnostic tools, education, and e- health tools for all health professionals, especially those based in rural areas.

Strategies include:

- Increasing the reach of accredited, skills based mental health training and clinical support to health professionals, in particular GPs who are the first point of contact, by supporting face-to-face and online accredited training programs in all states across Australia, including rural and regional areas;
- Providing supplementary support to mental health practitioners, by providing a rigorous online assessment and diagnostic tools, such as the Black Dog Institute's online Mood Assessment Program (MAP). The online MAP makes the management of patients suffering from a mood disorder more efficient, provides greater diagnostic accuracy and ensures more appropriate treatment choices; and
- Increasing early intervention and prevention programs for young people, through professional education for clinicians working with young people, school counsellors, principals, teachers and school staff

Recommendation 4: Encourage greater collaboration between government, health, community, education, training, employment and other services

Moving forward, for the effective implementation of government initiatives in overcoming these barriers, the Black Dog Institute supports greater collaboration between health, community, education, training, employment and other services.

The Black Dog Institute can play a key role in addressing these needs through a national plan which includes the provision of evidenced based mental health education for health professionals, clinical services, diagnostic and management tools, e-health tools, and workplace and community education programs.

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