Question: E12-377

OUTCOME 11: Mental Health

Topic: E-MENTAL HEALTH

Type of Question: Written Question on Notice

Number of pages: 2

Senator: Sentor Wright

Question:

I am interested, in particular, in what strategies the department has developed or implemented to address particular barriers that I have come across in my consultations. There are three that I have identified. One is the unavailability of mental health services in regions. Another is a lack of internet services to access e-mental-health services. An example there is the fact that obviously, in a country with the distance issues that Australia, e-health holds a lot of promise but it does rely on the ability of people to access computers and the technology and also have the literacy to be able to operate them. For instance, are there any strategies to ensure that there is technology available in Indigenous communities? The last of the barriers would be privacy—the issue of privacy and taboo in small towns and the issues that that creates in terms of conflicts of interest, stigma and so on. Has the department addressed any of those barriers?

Answer:

In relation to the availability of mental health services in regions, the answer provided to Question on Notice E12-085 provides information on the reach of some Commonwealth mental health programs in regional, rural and remote areas. The difficulty in providing services in rural and remote regions, including the additional cost, is recognised, and with a number of programs eg Mental Health Services in Rural and Remote Areas and the Access to Allied Psychological Therapies Program, this is factored into the program design.

In relation to e-mental health, the Australian Government launched a national online mental health portal called mindhealthconnect in July 2012. This site provides a gateway to authoritative information on a wide range of mental health issues and access to evidence-based online therapies. The site can be accessed at a time that suits the individual, and it can be done from home providing privacy and reducing the stigma many people experience in using mental health services, particularly in small communities. The automated therapy programs currently available through mindhealthconnect are designed for people with mild to moderate anxiety and depression disorders.

The support of local clinicians for online services will also be an important success factor. Part of the Government's strategy for increasing awareness and uptake of online services will be to build the confidence of the broader primary care workforce in the effectiveness of online mental health treatment.

The roll out of the National Broadband Network will further enhance the capability of e-mental health services to extend to those harder to reach communities as well as those living in social isolation.

The Australian Government has recently signed a funding agreement with Access Macquarie a subsidiary of Macquarie University, to establish and operate a virtual clinic which will provide real-time therapy with a trained counsellor either on-line or by telephone. This service will be provided free of charge with or without a referral from a health professional. Like the mindhealth*connect* portal, the virtual clinic allows people to receive treatment at a time and place of their choosing, which will help to reduce the stigma that can be associated with help-seeking. This service began operating in December 2012.