

Additional Estimates 2015 Opening Statement

Chair, before I begin, I would like to advise Senators of the appointment of Major General Craig Orme to the position of Deputy President of the Repatriation Commission and member of the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission.

Major General Orme has significant experience in senior Army and Defence Personnel roles as well as extensive operational, overseas and command experience. Most recently he served as the Commander Joint Task Force 633, with command of Australian Military forces in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Major General Orme comes to the role with prior knowledge of the position, having previously served as a member of the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission from 2009 to 2011.

I would also like to acknowledge Ms Judy Daniel, First Assistant Secretary, Health and Community Services who is appearing at her last Estimates before she retires at Easter. Ms Daniel has enjoyed a long and distinguished career in the Australian Public Service. She came to DVA from the Department of Health and Ageing in 2009 having previously served in Departments including PM&C and Finance.

I would like to thank Judy for her significant contribution to the leadership of the Department and the advice and support she has provided to me as Minister and wish her well in the future.

Introduction (Mental Health)

Mental health has been a major theme of my statements to this Committee. I take this opportunity to update the Parliament about the Government work to tackle the mental health challenges of veterans and their families.

1. Innovation and Reform

Contemporary Veterans

DVA continues to use new and innovative ways to reach out to contemporary veterans, encourage them to take action early to address any mental health concerns or other issues arising from their Defence service.

We know that our contemporary veterans are technology savvy, sourcing information online, often using mobile devices. A range of online platforms are available to promote mental health support including social media channels such as Facebook and YouTube, as well as online and mobile apps.

Peer to Peer Support

There is great potential in well-structured mental health peer support programmes which, when combined with evidence-based treatment, lead to improved quality of life.

assessment and treatment planning to assist mental health practitioners treating veterans and serving members.

Service Reform

The impact of alcohol and other substance disorders on members of the veteran community is a continued focus. Veterans and many peace time service personnel are now eligible for treatment at DVA expense for alcohol use disorder and substance use disorder, regardless of the cause and without the need to make a compensation claim.

In October 2014, my Department also contracted with 18 private mental health hospital organisations covering 59 facilities across Australia. These hospitals provide a range of acute care services, such as in-patient treatment, PTSD programmes, and sub-acute care.

2. Starting to see results

Times taken to process claims are declining

As this Committee knows, upon my appointment as Minister I made it clear that I was determined to reduce the average times taken to process compensation claims. At close to 160 days under the previous Government the time taken to process claims lodged under the *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004*, were both too high and unacceptable.

Efficiencies in processing were prioritised which led to small but significant improvements early on, which are continuing. These improvements are by no means the end of the story. Further changes to improve the operation of the Rehabilitation and Compensation Program are underway which will lead to long term strategic improvement in the way that claims are processed, and by extension, the speed at which claims are finalised.

The speedy resolution of a claim ensures that a veteran, and their family, can plan their lives with confidence. I see this as a pivotal part of the Government's commitment to recognise the unique nature of military service and, similarly, to tackle mental health challenges for veterans.

Claims processing times are not just numbers. As I have said before bringing claims processing times down are a part of our early intervention efforts.

Mental Health Expenditure increases

The most recent figures show that the Commonwealth Government's expenditure on mental health services is \$179 million, increasing from \$160 million in 2011-12..

This includes funding for online mental health information and support, GP services, psychologist and social work services, specialist psychiatric services, pharmaceuticals, trauma recovery programmes, in-patient and out-patient hospital treatment and services through the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS).

It is important to note that funding for mental health treatment is demand driven, and is not capped.

3. Looking to the future

PMAC

I was pleased to announce the establishment of the Prime Ministerial Advisory Council on Veterans' Mental Health in March 2014. It has now met on three occasions.

Former Chief of Navy, Vice Admiral Russ Crane AO CSM is the Chair and Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith VC MG is the Deputy Chair. The Council is currently focussing on three areas of strategic priority:

- a national communication strategy to promote a positive view of service and its contribution and to increase awareness of the available mental health services and the benefits of early intervention;
- peer support, as I have already mentioned, which will assist individuals to be suitably matched with peers to receive practical support in managing their mental health and wellbeing, leading to improved quality of life; and
- vocational rehabilitation and transition management, particularly looking at ways in which industry can be engaged to provide greater employment opportunities for former members undertaking vocational rehabilitation

Research

Research is another area in which this Government continues to plan for the future in order to help set policy directions in veteran mental health.

Work is progressing on the *Transition and Wellbeing Research Programme*, the largest and most comprehensive study of its type undertaken in Australia.

This programme of research will establish a mental health prevalence rate for the contemporary veteran community. My Department is working closely with the Department of Defence on this shared health research agenda.