

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON MENTAL HEALTH

This submission is on behalf of the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund and has been prepared by Joy Gillett, Chief Executive Officer and endorsed by the Board of Directors.

General Information on the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund

In 2000 the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund – a registered charity established by the Rotary Clubs of Australia to raise funds to assist with health research – elected to direct its research support and advocacy to the area of **Mental Illness**. This decision was based on our recognition that there was a great need to foster research in this area and to advocate for the needs of children, adolescents and adults in our community who experience mental illness.

Since 2000, over \$5 million has been allocated to Mental Illness research – project grants and scholarships. Furthermore, with the assistance of the Mental Health Branch of the Department of Health and Ageing, over 350 community forums have been held around Australia, focusing on Mental Illness and Depression. These forums have been hosted by local Rotary Clubs with the assistance of the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund. beyondblue, the national depression initiative has also supported these forums, both financially and by providing promotional material and speakers. The forums aim to destigmatise mental illness and encourage communities to respond to the needs and concerns of those experiencing mental illness

As a community organization, Rotary has 1,200 Rotary Clubs around Australia with an approximate membership of 38,000 Rotarians. With the average attendance at each forum of 80 – 100 people, we estimate over 30,000 people have attended a forum. In addition, information and educational material is regularly distributed to the 38,000 Rotarians in Australia.

We have now extended our advocacy to undertake forums within Probus Clubs. Probus is an organization of retired business and professional people with a membership of 120,000 across Australia. Membership of a Probus Club averages about 75 people and forums are being held in place of a regular Probus Club meeting.

Mental Illness Community forums have been held in city as well as country areas. Audiences at forums range from the members of Rotary Clubs and their families, members of the general public, mental health support and service groups and professionals.

The following terms of reference are addressed.

b. the adequacy of various modes of care for people with a mental illness, in particular, prevention, early intervention, acute care, community care, after hours crisis services and respite care.

Feedback from the community forums on mental health, being held around Australia, clearly indicated that a lack of adequate services for those with mental illness is a major concern for consumers and carers. Respite care and after hours care are rarely available and consumers must often wait many weeks before professional help is available.

There is little consistency in treatment programs with consumers often seeing a different clinician each time they visit a public mental health facility. This inevitably

creates distrust and dissatisfaction with the service, and means there is little continuity of care.

d. the appropriate role of the private and non-government sectors

As a non-government sector representing the community, Rotary Clubs have the ability to gather their local community to attend an information forum on mental health. Rotary's reputation in each local community ensures that these forums are seen as non-political, non-segregated and without bias regarding treatment.

This community awareness program must, however, be supported by service provision through both private and government sectors.

f. the special needs of groups such as children, adolescents, the aged, Indigenous Australians, the socially and geographically isolated and of people with complex and co-morbid conditions and drug and alcohol dependence.

Each of these groups requires individual action to address their particular problems. The mental health needs of children and adolescents should be addressed in schools as well as in the home. Education programs through schools should be part of each school curriculum.

The needs of the aged require concentration on de-stigmatisation. This can be achieved through education to community groups through organizations such as Probus and pensioner associations.

One area of interest to Rotary is the effects of the drought in rural areas and the rate of suicide in rural areas, particular among young people. The rate of depressive disorders is alarming and concerning for Rotarians and for members of the community in rural areas. Research in this area is vital and direct financial assistance to farmers and country people is required.

The lack of services in country areas is also of concern to Rotarians. Many people living in rural areas have to travel long distances to obtain specialist help with mental illness. People living in rural areas also experience great stigma when they must attend mental health services.

l. the adequacy of education in de-stigmatising mental illness and disorders and in providing support service information to people affected by mental illness and their families and carers.

Rotarians have discovered in the community forums, that the stigma of having a mental illness is often more distressing for sufferers than the effects of the illness itself. In order to de-stigmatise mental illness more education and advocacy is needed – at all levels – but through schools in particular. We need to make clear that mental illnesses are just like any other illnesses. Much has been done to destigmatise other illnesses such as TB, cancer, and AIDS. We must do the same for mental illness.

Rotarians strongly believe that blaming those with mental illness for having their condition or viewing them as being “weak” is totally unacceptable. We must work to address these issues.

The work of Rotary and particularly beyondblue in depression awareness, is beginning to have an impact but more work is needed.

The continuation of the Rotary and beyondblue Community Forum program on Mental Illness awareness and education should be continued and expanded.

n. the current state of mental health research, the adequacy of funding and the extent to which best practice is disseminated.

The Australian Rotary Health Research Fund is currently providing \$1.1 million each year to research in mental illness. Each year over 100 applications are received for funding and only 25 requests are approved. The inadequacy of funds is evident especially as our criteria for funding limits each research project to a maximum amount of \$60,000.

Research funded through the Australian government in Mental Illness is also much less than other developed countries and needs to be increased.

Many research projects are achieving results and providing recommendations that are not put into practice due to inadequate service provision. More effective methods of disseminating findings from research are required.

SUMMARY

To summarise, the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund would like to recommend that the Senate address the following issues –

- Improved public and private services for the mentally ill including reduction of waiting time for initial treatment
- Increase availability of Respite Care
- After Hours care increased
- Encouragement to community groups, including Rotary, to continue with mental health community education – but make sure services are able to cope with increased demand
- Increased numbers of community mental health forums in rural and remote areas
- Increase and improve education programs in schools, and in community groups attended by older Australians
- Increased assistance to drought affected areas
- Greater assistance and research within the indigenous community – especially in the area of substance abuse and other sociological problems with the emphasis on early intervention
- Increased assistance to areas with perpetual youth unemployment with the emphasis on reducing sociological problems
- Public promotion on mental illness – liken to all other illnesses
- Increased research in mental health/illness
- Improve dissemination of research

Rotary is keen to work with local communities to help those with mental illness and to foster research which will enable us to deliver more effective interventions designed to reduce mental illness in Australia.