

The international context

Australia's National Mental Health Strategy (NMHS) is considered highly by the international community. At the time the NMHS was introduced in Australia, there were few international precedents. Of 190 countries surveyed by the World Health Organization in 2004, only 55 (29 per cent) had a national mental health policy before 1992, and many of these were minimal statements. Since then, another 59 countries (31 per cent) have introduced such policies, and a number have looked to Australia for strategic direction.⁴⁰

The quotations below illustrate the international respect for, Australia's approach:

- Dr Ronald Manderscheid, Deputy Director of the Center for Mental Health Services, a central unit of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, was invited to provide international expert commentary on the National Mental Health Strategy as part of the evaluation of the first National Mental Health Plan.⁴¹

Australia has articulated a national mental health policy through the National Mental Health Strategy, has provided flexible resources to facilitate system transitions from an inpatient to a more balanced service delivery system, has engaged consumers and carers in focal roles and has emphasised concerns with quality and outcome as major system goals. Taken together, these four elements reflect the cutting edge of mental health at the international level.

- Professor Graham Thornicroft and Professor Virginia Trotter Betts provided a similar international perspective when they reviewed the achievements of the NMHS at the end of the second National Mental Health Plan.⁴² Both were eminently qualified to comment: Professor Thornicroft is a Consultant in Community Psychiatry at Maudsley Hospital, Director of Research and Development at the South London and Maudsley National Health Service Trust, Professor of Community Psychiatry and Head of the Health Service Research Department at the Institute of Psychiatry Kings College in London. Professor Betts is the Director for Health Policy and Professor of Nursing at University of Tennessee Health Sciences Centre. They noted:

Australia's National Mental Health Strategy is a standard for other nations in what can and should be done as a national policy initiative and demonstrates how federal and state governments can agree through policy documents to address difficult social and health concerns. Perhaps no other nation on earth has taken the time to focus its intellectual and political capital to develop such an extensive, measurable plan as the National Mental Health Strategy.

- In its own examination of mental health services in Canada, the Canadian Standing Senate Committee On Social Affairs, Science and Technology considered that Australia could provide some valuable lessons.⁴³ The committee commented:

It is clear ... that Canada has a great deal to learn from Australia in the field of mental health and mental illness. In particular, the consistent commitment for over a decade by both the Commonwealth and state governments in Australia to planning and monitoring progress through regular reporting has set international benchmarks that Canada is a long way from attaining ... As a federal state, Australia has ... demonstrated the importance of close cooperation between the various levels of government and of the benefits that can be derived by all communities when this collaboration is sustained.