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Urgent upscale in psychology workforce needed

AUSTRALIA faces a crippling shortfall in care for people with the most debilitating mental health conditions prompting psychology experts to call for an urgent upscaling in supervised training and further education for students wanting to work in specialised high demand areas such as clinical psychology.

Speaking on behalf of a coalition of mental health agencies Australian Clinical Psychology Association President Prof Caroline Hunt said creating training and education opportunities for students will avoid a crippling deficit in care for Australians with the most complex mental health conditions.

“We need to at least double the number of new post graduate psychology registrations in specialised areas annually from around 500 to 1000. There is a critical shortfall in Government funding for Commonwealth Supported Places at university for postgraduate study in clinical psychology, and other specialised psychology fields, making it difficult for universities to offer the number of places needed for students to move into this high demand workforce,” Prof Hunt said.

“Psychology needs funding equivalency for postgraduate programs which will bring it in line with medicine, dentistry and veterinary science. Responsible and caring governments must prioritise mental health alongside physical health by matching funding for postgraduate workforce training.

“Currently, Commonwealth funding for courses like medicine sits at \$27,000 annually but post graduate psychology is at just \$13,250.

“We are looking at a situation where wait lists for patient care will soar in the years to come because the clinical psychology workforce is not training enough new candidates. Currently students just can’t find enough Commonwealth Supported Places for their post graduate study and the vast majority of young Australians simply cannot afford the \$70,000 needed to study for two years as a full fee paying student. We cannot allow a situation where Commonwealth Supported Funding is so low and where universities can’t afford to offer the post graduate places required.”

Institute of Clinical Psychologists President Dr Marjorie Collins said every year, universities were turning away able and willing students who could not secure one of the very limited post graduate Commonwealth Supported Places or the required supervised clinical training.

“Mental ill health can be just as debilitating and serious as physical ill health and the failure to adequately fund post graduate study for young Australians wanting to support people struggling with complex mental health issues is alarming,” Dr Collins said.

“Many students are capable and willing to pursue postgraduate clinical psychology study but the Commonwealth funding contributions to universities running postgraduate psychology courses mean either universities can’t afford to run the courses or the funding arrangement pushes an unfair cost burden onto students looking to work in high demand fields such as clinical, neuropsychology, counselling, educational and developmental psychology.”

Lived Experience Australia Chair and Executive Director Prof Sharon Lawn said the lag in post graduate education and training would come at a high cost for patients in the future, particularly those living in rural and regional areas where specialised mental health care was already difficult to find.

“I am alarmed to see the number of highly trained specialised mental health professionals stagnating at the same time as Australia’s mental health crisis and demand for services is soaring,” Prof Lawn said.

Prof Hunt said there was an urgent need to at least double the number of new post graduate psychology registrations in specialised areas annually from around 500 to 1000.

“To achieve this, governments must take mental health seriously and invest significantly into post graduate study and the related clinical supervision training programs so Australians can get high quality care,” Prof Hunt said.

“Post graduate psychology study needs an urgent funding injection and equivalence with medicine, dentistry and vet science so Australians needing complex mental health care can get help when they need it.

“Selling out Australians with complex mental health problems with an easy fix such as lowering educational or professional standards is not the solution to workforce shortages. This is like suggesting that a shortage of surgeons is best resolved by letting those who are not yet fully qualified or don't have training in the specialty of surgery to make up the shortfall.

“It is critical that postgraduate psychology training and supervision issues are urgently addressed by Government and regulatory agencies so Australians may continue to access specialised and expert mental health care from endorsed professionals.”

-- ENDS --

A COALITION OF EXPERTS

Leading psychology organisations have formed a coalition to address the ongoing shortfall in workforce planning and training for specialised psychologists who will care for Australia's most unwell mental health patients in the future.

The Institute of Clinical Psychologists, Australian Clinical Psychology Association and Lived Experience Australia are working together to express the serious shortfalls in care Australians will face when seeking specialised psychology services in areas such as clinical, counselling, educational and developmental; and neuropsychology services.



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