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WentWest Limited

For further information

Amelia Hunt

Media and Communications Specialist

P 8811 7100

E amelia.hunt@wentwest.com.au

MEDIA RELEASE

Using Predictive Modelling to Map the Future of Youth Mental Health

Data from 2020-21 showed that young people aged 16-24 years experienced the highest rates of psychological distress, substance use disorders, affective disorders and anxiety disorders compared to any other age groupⁱ. Looking at anxiety alone, almost one-third of young people in this age bracket experienced a 12-month anxiety disorder, with this figure rising to 41.3% in females. And is it any wonder? Over the past three years, young people in Western Sydney have faced the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, flooding, lockdowns, homeschooling, and financial instability, all within their fundamental developmental years.

Unfortunately, the long-term impacts of mental ill-health are significant, with mental illness the single largest cause of disability in Australia. Particularly in young people, mental health can have a ripple effect on behavioural development, physical health, quality of life, life expectancy, social connectedness and economic participation, and it is critical that young people access the right care the first time to ensure a positive life trajectory.

In Western Sydney, more than half of residents are born overseas, and over 58% speak a language other than English at home. Predictions also suggest that the Greater Western Sydney region will absorb two-thirds of Sydney's population growth by 2036. So, how should services adapt to support a growing, diverse population? How can we measure the long-term impact of mental health interventions on a young person's life? How can we predict what support a young person who is receiving care now will need in six months' time?

To help address these questions, the Western Sydney Primary Health Network (WSPHN) has partnered with the [University of Sydney Brain and Mind Centre](#) to implement the '[Right Care, First Time, Where You Live](#)' project in Western Sydney.

Ray Messom, CEO of WSPHN shared, *"We're incredibly fortunate to commission a fantastic range of mental health providers in our region who provide person-centred, holistic care to young people of all cultures and backgrounds. However, predictive modelling which looks across acute, community and primary care services to identify gaps is missing in mental health. The Right Care, First Time, Where You Live project will allow us to utilise publicly accessible and local Western Sydney data about young people's journey through care to progressively move the system to focusing more and more on wellness rather than sickness."*

“In the future, using systems modelling to project mental health trajectories, we’ll be able to test possible solutions to help young people, commissioning bodies, and policymakers understand what combination of programs, services or system reforms are likely to deliver the most sustainable outcomes and best package of holistic, high-quality care solutions for young people to thrive. We’re so excited to be partnering with the University of Sydney on this innovative project and privileged to welcome Honourable Victor Dominello as an advisor”.

Mr Dominello, who has joined Sydney University’s research team within the Brain and Mind Centre in an advisory role, stated, *“The use of systems modelling and data to help decision-making processes at a regional level for mental health is unique. When we fail to make decisions based on the best data available, then we are choosing to fly in the dark. Difficult social challenges like mental health, require the best visibility to ensure optimal outcomes”.*

The ‘Right Care, First Time, Where You Live’ project kicked off on Thursday 7 September with the first of three community workshops that will help engage stakeholders, map the current health system and prioritise interventions to feed into the draft data model. Explaining the co-design process, which includes inputs from local young people and professionals from across the health, education and social sectors, Professor Ian Hickie, Co-director of the Brain and Mind Centre, commented, *“Genuine community engagement and civic leadership is critical.”*

By bringing the community together to understand the current mental health landscape and using real-time data to build predictive models, the future of youth mental health in Western Sydney is bright.

ⁱ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health/national-study-mental-health-and-wellbeing/2020-21>