



MEDIA RELEASE



***Who Cares...?* launched – but what next for carers of people with mental illness?**

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The Mental Health Council of Australia (MHCA) and the National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum (NMHCCF) today welcomed many of the recommendations in *Who Cares...? Report on the inquiry into better support for carers*, but want to see a strong Government commitment to ongoing funding and support for their implementation.

Many of the report's 50 recommendations will be of significant benefit to carers of people with a mental illness, including:

- Expanded health and community care services in regional and remote locations;
- Increased funding for Government-funded respite care services to match demand;
- A significant increase in the base rate of carer payments;
- A preventative health care program targeted at carers, and expansion of the National Carers Counselling Program;
- Better data collection on carers to more accurately determine the number of carers and the level of unmet need for community based support services;
- A national community education campaign to promote understanding and appreciation of the caring role;
- Increased recognition of carers through legislative review and a carer recognition framework;
- Incentives for carers to be involved in training and employment, and recognition of the needs of carers seeking employment; and
- A new survey measuring the financial costs of caring for a person with a disability.

Of particular importance to carers of people with a mental illness is the recommendation that a new assessment process be developed for Carer Payment and Carer Allowance that recognises the level and nature of support provided by carers of people with mental illness, and has regard to the episodic nature of some mental health conditions.

Judy Bentley, a long-term carer of a person with mental illness and an advocate for carers, stresses the importance of this review.

"I only know of one carer of a person with mental illness who gets carer payment. No-one else I know has been eligible, because the questions on the carer payment application form are designed for carers of people with physical disabilities. But that doesn't mean we don't provide an enormous amount of care, and provide significant financial support," Ms Bentley said.

The MHCA and NMHCCF now call on the Federal Government to provide a strong commitment to carers by providing funding and support for the report's recommendations.

David Crosbie, MHCA Chief Executive Officer, said "This report provides an insight into the daily struggle faced by many carers, including carers of people with a mental illness, and the recommendations have the potential to go some way towards meeting their needs.

"But the Government has to go beyond establishing this inquiry. This report can't now just sit on a shelf – its recommendations must be acted upon, or the contribution of the hundreds of carers who made submissions will have been wasted," Mr Crosbie said.

Mr Crosbie also stressed the importance of increased data collection about carers, as recommended in the report.

"At the moment we don't even have a clear idea of how many carers there are, let alone whether they're getting the support they need. Without regular, independent and validated information collection on the experiences of mental health carers, we won't know what services are required or whether the existing services are meeting carers' needs."

While the MHCA and NMHCCF recognise that this inquiry focused on the needs of carers, both organisations also emphasise the enormous benefits that mental health carers would receive from improved services for the people that they care for.

"The burdens on mental health carers would be substantially reduced if there were services in the community that provided supported accommodation, supported employment, and social and recreational activities for people with mental illness – not to mention better early intervention and clinical care. Currently mental health carers are expected to fill the gaps in services provision, and they do. But their lives would be immeasurably better if these essential services were in place," Mr Crosbie said.

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