

NSW Consumer Advisory
Group - Mental Health Inc

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NATIONAL HEALTH REFORM – MENTAL HEALTH AT RISK

The NSW Consumer Advisory Group – Mental Health Inc (NSW CAG) expresses alarm that mental health services will be compromised.

The Federal Government's health reform plan released this week neglected to include any real policy about mental health care. "The absence of a direction for mental health within the health reform plan released to date is alarming and illustrates the lack of consideration the federal government has given to mental health. It risks returning mental health services and people with a mental illness to the position of the poor relations in health whose needs are ignored by the system" says Karen Oakley, Executive Officer of the NSW Consumer Advisory Group – Mental Health Inc. (NSW CAG).

"Clear direction and specific funding for mental health within the reform is essential if mental health is to be taken forward. It is also critical for mental health to be integrated within mainstream health to ensure a holistic approach to people's physical and mental health needs. Many people with a mental illness also have a physical illness and these must be addressed in an integrated manner. This can only be achieved if mental health is situated within the mainstream health system."

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The health reform proposal released to date suggests a separation of hospitals, which will be under the policy and governance of Local Hospital Networks and community health, which is likely to come under the jurisdiction of the Primary Health Care Organisations. NSW CAG is concerned that such segregation will place the decades of progress that has been achieved in the sector under threat, and risks the health care of people with a mental illness.

“Separating community mental health services from inpatient services poses a serious risk to the treatment and care provided to people who experience mental illness. Having separate policy structures will not allow for the integration of services and continuity of care that we have been advocating for and working towards” says Ms Oakley.

“Transitioning from hospital to community care is a time of particular vulnerability for people with a mental illness. It is essential that the whole mental health system, including community services, inpatient services and non-government services are operating in a way that ensures a smooth transition as well as good continuity of care to support people at these times. NSW CAG is concerned that the separation of policy for community mental health from the hospital will jeopardize this, placing people at serious risk.”

The only mention of mental health in the document “A National Health and Hospitals Network: Further Investments in Australia’s Health” released on 12 April, is under “Next Steps” (p. 92). Here emphasis is placed on young people at risk of or with a mental illness.

Ms Oakley says “While we recognise the importance of ensuring services and resources for young people, it is a grave mistake for any reform to not consider the whole population of people requiring mental health services, and the whole spectrum of services required. Any system needs to cater for prevention and early intervention, acute and crisis needs as well as for those with recurrent or persistent mental illness and complex needs. It must also include services for all diagnostic categories.”

“We are also concerned that the increasing recognition of the centrality of community mental health services in NSW will be lost under federal governance and funding. We are concerned that the focus will again return to hospital based services. Whatever the system, there needs to be strong structures in place that ensure an ongoing emphasis on community based care, and funding dedicated to community mental health services.

“COAG and the federal government have a serious responsibility for people’s lives in the decisions they will be making. NSW CAG urges the COAG meeting to be held on Monday to place the people who use services, particularly mental health services at the centre of all discussions and decisions, and not to allow political agendas and funding to dominate. The focus must be on ensuring a health system that meets the holistic needs of individuals. The current proposals will not enable this,” says Ms Oakley.

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FOR ENQUIRES OR FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

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ABOUT THE NSW CONSUMER ADVISORY GROUP – MENTAL HEALTH INC

The NSW Consumer Advisory Group – Mental Health Inc (NSW CAG) is the statewide, incorporated, non-government peak body that represents people who use mental health services (mental health consumers) to all levels of the NSW Government. In this way NSW CAG acts as a bridge between mental health consumers and the government.

An essential part of our role is to encourage mental health consumers to provide input into decision making at all levels concerning mental health service provision.

NSW CAG is funded by the Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol Office, NSW Department of Health.

WHAT IS A MENTAL HEALTH CONSUMER?

A mental health consumer is a person who has used mental health services. NSW CAG also hears from people who do not have this experience, but who have the experience of mental illness.