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MEDIA RELEASE

COVID-19 AND MENTAL HEALTH: ARE WE REALLY ALL IN IT TOGETHER?

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WHEN it comes to COVID-19 and its effect on the mental health of Australians, we may “all be in this together” but some are further in than others, according to the one of the nation’s leading mental health practitioners and researchers.

Professor Patrick McGorry AO, is Professor of Youth Mental Health at the University of Melbourne, and is Executive Director of Orygen, the National Centre for Excellence in Youth Mental Health.

In an editorial published online by the Medical Journal of Australia today, Professor McGorry wrote that the COVID-19 pandemic’s effects on mental health “will be deeper and more sustained than in other disasters”.

“The initial mental health impact has been severe, and worse may be coming,” he wrote.

“Scientific models predicted that Australia would face a second curve of mental ill health and suicide, and this has now clearly arrived.

“We have been willing to turn our society and lives upside down to flatten the COVID-19 curve. The same commitment is now required to flatten the mental health curve.”

Professor McGorry wrote that the impact of the pandemic was not uniform and there were groups at especial risk – the already marginalised and disadvantaged, young people, women, those living alone and those already unemployed.

“Young people are especially disproportionately affected, and face a generation-defining disruption that will have a multi-faceted, long term impact on their lives. Socio-economic inequality is a major risk factor for an array of negative health and social outcomes, including mental illness, and the potency of this risk factor will be magnified by a pandemic followed by a recession.

“We may all be in this together, but some are further in than others.”

Professor McGorry wrote that there were opportunities to save lives if significant actions were taken now to reform the mental health system.

“Firstly, policymakers must accept that this is not a routine disaster and that the times call for a very different approach,” he wrote.

“Economic measures to soften the impact of the recession are the paramount preventive strategy. The global financial crisis showed how destructive austerity policies are, increasing inequality and social determinants of mental ill health, as well as weakening the social fabric and democracy itself.

“Secondly, the crisis provides a unique opportunity to create the ‘new mental health care’ by dramatically reforming and strengthening the current system,” he wrote.

“Shifting the centre of gravity of mental health care to local communities via integrated care hubs linked closely with primary care ... could easily be fast tracked in the shadow of COVID-19, initially as pop-ups boosted by digital technology and outreach.

“State governments should consider releasing the governance of community mental health care from large hospital-centric health networks so that it is embraced and can be accessed by local communities. And federal commissioning of community mental health care should be more coherent, guided by national evidence-based standards, with the goal of regional integration of services.”

The coming months would be crucial, Professor McGorry concluded.

“The coming months will reveal whether we are really all in this together or whether the 5 million Australians (and rapidly growing) who confront mental ill health each year will continue to be treated as second class citizens.”

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