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Community mental health key to supporting patients

The myriad mental health programs should be better aligned so patients stop falling through system cracks that result in 65 percent of people who need care missing out, says Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) Dr Emil Djakic.

His view was supported by the National Advisory Council Discussion Paper on Mental Health titled *A Mental Healthy Future for all Australians* released last week.

"This paper is long overdue. General Practitioners (GPs) are at the front line of mental health care in this country. While there are a number of programs, what we really need is a toolkit of connected programs so patients will be able to access care through a number of mechanisms," he said.

Building on successful mental health programs already available in the community – like Access To Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS) and **headspace** were highlighted in AGPN's Federal Budget submission.

"These programs have improved service capacity, and have particularly targeted groups that struggle to access care – young people and low socio-economic groups.

"Better coordinated multidisciplinary care is essential, and it needs a community focus because that's where mental health issues are first identified. Our Budget submission calls for improving access to these services, which is clearly in line with the Council's thinking on these matters," Dr Djakic said.

AGPN supported the Council's call to remove system fragmentation and the resulting inequity that leaves patients out in the cold.

Mental health problems often arise in teenage years and services like headspace have been invaluable in targeting mental health issues early. Headspace centres have trained staff who support youth aged between 15 and 25 manage drug, alcohol and mental health problems.

"One way we can work on improving access to psychological services and helping patients to access them is by identifying people at risk early and educating them about what is available. We also need to continue to lower the stigma around mental health, that's something not just doctors, but all Australians can work to achieve," he said.

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