



**Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention
and Early Intervention for Mental Health**

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2008-2009 Federal Pre-Budget Submission

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An opportunity to re-position Australia as a world leader in the prevention of mental disorder

Auseinet

Auseinet (The Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health) is a national initiative located at Flinders University in South Australia. The focus of Auseinet is to assist a diverse range of sectors and service providers to implement strategies that address the prevention of mental disorder and promote positive mental health and wellbeing in their respective settings. Auseinet currently receives some project funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and from state and territory jurisdictions. A key role of Auseinet is to facilitate the translation of policy and evidence to practice to enable service providers to implement evidence-based strategies. Auseinet is essentially an informal peak body for mental health promotion and illness prevention in Australia and as such provides leadership and advocacy for mental health promotion and illness prevention nationally.

Australia's position in the international context

In the late 1990s there was recognition and acknowledgement from the Australian Government that there needed to be a much greater focus on prevention of mental disorder and promotion of mental health and wellbeing in mental health policy and service orientation. As a result, a number of actions were taken, including the development of a National Promotion and Prevention Working Party to advise AHMAC, the development of national policy on mental health promotion and illness prevention, and the funding of a range of national initiatives (including Auseinet) to address key promotion and prevention issues.

These developments put Australia on the map internationally. Other countries (eg England, Scotland, Ireland) have used Australian policy as the benchmark and have adapted Australian programmes and models (eg MindMatters, Mental Health First Aid, Triple P) for their particular use.

However, over the past few years much of that momentum has been lost as the pendulum in mental health has swung back to early intervention and treatment. While acknowledging that the COAG mental health reform initiative has injected huge investment in mental health, on close analysis, most of this investment is targeted at "downstream" activities such as early intervention and treatment.

No one would deny that the mental health service system is in need of greater investment, but we wish to highlight in this submission that there is also an ongoing and important need to invest in prevention.

Effective implementation of prevention and wellness approaches in mental health requires a higher priority and greater investment

The evidence is very clear that the burden of mental health problems and mental disorders is high and rising. “Five of the ten leading causes of premature death worldwide are psychiatric conditions. Mental disorders represent not only an immense psychological, social and economic burden to society, but also increase the risk of physical illnesses” (WHO, 2004a). In 1997, the Australian Bureau of Statistics surveyed 10,600 householders in Australia to assess mental health morbidity, disability and service use at the population level. This survey found, similar to other countries, that 18% of the Australian population met the criteria for mental disorder or substance abuse in a 12 month period and that these cover considerable disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997).

It is widely recognised and understood that treatment interventions alone cannot significantly reduce the burden of mental disorder and that there is compelling evidence that implementation of promotion, prevention and early intervention approaches will significantly reduce the burden of mental illness and mental disorder. Given the current limitations in effectiveness of treatment interventions for decreasing disability due to mental disorders, the only sustainable method for reducing the burden caused by these disorders is prevention.

Increasingly, there is a growing body of evidence that effective prevention can reduce the risk of mental disorders. There is a wide range of evidence-based programmes that have been found to reduce risk factors, strengthen protective factors and minimise the onset of some mental disorders. They also improve positive mental health, contribute to better physical health and generate social and economic benefits. These multi-outcome interventions illustrate that prevention can be cost effective. Examples of these include comprehensive parenting programs, school based interventions, community interventions and mental health literacy.

Australian mental health policy is underpinned by a population health approach, and promotion and prevention is a key platform in the *National Mental Health Plan 2003-2008*. This is consistent with international policy developed by WHO (2004a, 2004b). A population health approach involves addressing the social determinants and risk and protective factors at a range of levels, including individual, family, community and society. However, the funding and service delivery models in the current mental health system do not reflect this. They are predominantly based on a medical model and focus more on addressing “downstream” activities such as early intervention and early treatment when mental health problems are already evident. More attention and investment needs to be given to “upstream” activities such as mental health promotion and prevention interventions which reduce the onset of mental health problems.

Recommendation 1

That the Australian Government gives prevention of mental disorder and promotion of mental health and wellbeing a higher priority in order to re-position Australia as a world leader.

Effective implementation of mental health promotion and illness prevention strategies requires a whole of government approach

Mental health is regarded as “everybody’s business” as it is determined by multiple biological, psychological, social and environmental factors. Mental health is affected by individual factors and experiences, social interaction, societal structures and resources, and cultural values. It is influenced by experiences in everyday life, in families and schools, in workplaces and communities. For example, housing, employment, transport, sense of belonging and social connectedness, are all factors influencing mental health. Therefore, implementing strategies for enhancing mental health and wellbeing and preventing mental ill-health is not just a health issue; it requires collaboration across multiple sectors and portfolio areas.

Most of the current investment comes from the health portfolio but increasingly, this investment needs to be shared across a range of portfolio areas. Therefore, a whole of government approach is required.

Recommendation 2

That the Australian Government considers establishing a National Advisory Council to address prevention of mental disorder and promotion of mental health and wellbeing, with membership from a range of portfolio areas (eg health, housing, education, employment, families).

Effective implementation requires an increased focus on leadership, advocacy and co-ordination at a national level

The effective implementation of promotion and prevention approaches is complex as it requires a diverse range of sectors and workforces to work in collaboration. It also involves co-operation between different levels of government and across different government departments. To effectively drive change, a higher level of co-ordination, leadership and advocacy will be required than has been invested in to date. Auseinet has played a major role in providing leadership and co-ordination over the past 9 years, but the current investment is not sufficient for the scope of the task at hand. The model that Auseinet has developed to drive implementation of promotion and prevention programmes has received international attention, with other countries recognising the importance of an organisation dedicated to assisting the implementation process across diverse workforces and sectors. This needs to be expanded and further strengthened with additional investment.

Recommendation 3

That funding be provided to further expand the Auseinet model and establish a National Centre which provides leadership, advocacy and co-ordination nationally across governments and sectors.

Strategies for enhancing mental health and wellbeing need to receive more attention in the COAG Mental Health Reform Initiative

While it is important to acknowledge the priority of the Australian Government in increasing their investment in mental health through the COAG Initiative, most of the funding is targeted to improving the mental health service system. Even though there is a component for promotion and prevention initiatives, very few of the initiatives are focussed on population groups and settings where investment early in the life cycle (eg children, families, schools) will have an influence on future mental health status. Most programmes are targeted at identifying and treating symptoms early and improving service responsiveness. In essence, the investment is more illness focussed than health focussed.

Given that current national and international policy indicates that promotion and prevention must be a key priority, and the focus of these interventions need to occur in the settings of everyday life, the level of investment in this priority area is not proportional to the identified need.

However, an advantage of the COAG initiative is the co-operation between different levels of government. Given that the responsibility for promotion and prevention is broader than the health sector and involves both commonwealth and state and territory governments, it is an existing vehicle that can drive change in the system.

Recommendation 4

The COAG National Mental Health Plan be reviewed, where appropriate, to consider funding for evidence-based prevention and promotion programmes focussed on the settings of everyday life. (eg schools, families, workplaces).

Greater attention needs to be given to developing and maintaining a competent workforce to implement prevention and promotion approaches

The development and sustainability of mental health promotion and prevention is dependent on having a skilled and informed workforce with the necessary competencies. Partnership approaches and the implementation of cross-sectoral strategies call for high levels of expertise in order to engage and facilitate the participation of diverse sectors. The workforce required for this task can be categorised at two levels:

- Dedicated mental health promotion and prevention specialists who facilitate and support the development of policy and good practice across a range of settings, and
- The wider workforce drawn from different sectors such as health, education, employment, community and non-government organisations.

In Australia, there is an expectation that the wider workforce carry out the task of implementation of promotion and prevention approaches as only few jurisdictions have established dedicated mental health promotion officer positions. The wider workforce is expected to undertake this work with minimal supervision and investment in workforce development programmes. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that there needs to be investment in the strategic leadership and specialist skills required for effective translation of policy and evidence into effective and sustainable local implementation.

Over the past year, Auseinet has been developing a national workforce development programme for the wider workforce and is currently in discussion with Flinders University Department of Public Health about developing short courses and graduate programmes.

Recommendation 5

That investment be considered for: building a specialist mental health promotion and prevention workforce nationally; and continuing and further expanding the workforce development programmes for the wider workforce.

Summary

In this pre-budget submission, Auseinet has proposed a series of recommendations that have the potential to re-position Australia as a world leader in the prevention of mental disorder. Unlike early identification and treatment of mental health problems, the prevention of mental disorders and promotion of mental health and wellbeing require broader input and participation from a range of sectors and settings. Many of the key drivers lie outside of the health sector. Therefore, the recommendations indicate the need for sharing the responsibility and investment for mental health much more broadly than the mental health and health sector. Considering these recommendations represents a unique opportunity to make a difference to the mental health status of the Australian population.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997). *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing in Adults*. Canberra: ABS.
- World Health Organization (2004a). *Prevention of Mental Disorders; Effective Interventions and Policy Options*. Geneva: WHO.
- World Health Organization (2004b). *Promoting Mental Health: Concepts, Evidence and Practice*. Geneva: WHO.