

THURSDAY 9 FEBRUARY 2006

## EXPERTS CALL FOR MORE MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH FUNDS

Tomorrow's COAG meeting should consider committing substantial funds to finding out more about why one in five Australians will suffer from mental health problems this year, the head of one of Australia's foremost mental health research institutions said.

The Director of the Centre for Mental Health Research at ANU, Professor Helen Christensen, welcomed the decision by Prime Minister John Howard to add mental health funding to this Friday's agenda.

"Mental health disorders contribute 19.1 per cent to Australia's total disease burden as the major source of disability in Australia, ahead of cardiovascular disease and cancer, but mental health receives only 8.9 per cent of national medical research funding," Professor Christensen said.

"Sufficient funding for the treatment of mental health is essential, but needs to be complemented by a commitment to basic research to better understand why so many Australians have mental health problems in the first place.

"The annual rate of expenditure allocated to both the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and other sources urgently needs to be increased. It's clear that the current rate of 3.3 per cent of the total health research and development funding for mental health is totally inadequate, given the crisis Australia is facing in mental health research," she said.

"Research funding should be directed to priorities in terms of the health cost and disease burden imposed by mental health problems. Dementia research, research into anxiety and depression, research outside of clinical settings, consumer driven research and research into early intervention and prevention are priorities.

"Other areas which urgently require more research are the mental health of older Australians, given the ageing of our population, and the high proportion of mental health sufferers in rural areas. Our 2004 study, *Suicide and mental health in rural, remote and metropolitan areas in Australia* (Caldwell et. al.) showed that young rural men accounted for 40.4 suicides per 100,000 people, and those living in remote Australia accounted for 51.7 suicides per 100,000 people, compared with 31.8 per 100,000 in metropolitan Australia," Professor Christensen said.

"Funding for mental health research compares badly with cancer research, which attracts 9 per cent of total R&D funds, cardiovascular research with 6 per cent, and infectious diseases with 6 per cent. Australia also performs poorly in researching mental health compared with Canada and New Zealand, and only 3 per cent of the 286 NHMRC Research fellows in Australia in 2005 specialised in mental health," she said.

"Australia has a 'silent plague' creeping across the country. We need to find out why so many are suffering mental health problems in the so-called 'Lucky Country'."

*The Australian Foundation for Mental Health Research supports the work of the Centre for Mental Health Research by raising funds for essential research into depression and other mental health problems. Media contact for the Australian Foundation for Mental Health Research: Niree Creed, 0418 625 595.*