

THE THIRD NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH PLAN 2003 -2008

The National Mental Health Plan (NMHP) 2003-2008 is the third in a series of National Mental Health Plans. The first was released in 1992 and covered the five year period to 1997. It concentrated on reform to specialist mental health services, increased the emphasis on community based care, decreased reliance on institutional care and mainstreamed acute beds into general hospitals. Its major focus was the low prevalence mental illnesses such as psychosis and bipolar disorder. The second NMHP released in 1997 consolidated the reform activities of the first plan in addition to an emphasis on promotion and prevention, the development of cross sector partnerships in service reform and quality and effectiveness in service delivery. It extended its focus to include the high prevalence disorders such as depression and anxiety disorders. The NMHP 2003-2008 has service responsiveness, quality care, research, innovation and sustainability as its priority themes articulated within the population health approach.

Prior to the , medical and nursing students were educated to believe that 'mental illness' occurred in equal degree across all socio economic groups, a diagnosis of mental illness was a life sentence and there was no such thing as recovery. The National Mental Health Plans have taken a new approach that situates psychiatry in both a biomedical model and a socio economic and cultural framework that promotes recovery and understands psychiatry and its treatment modalities as the circuit breaker in a causal chain.

In the foreword to the NMHP 2003-2008 it states that there has been considerable development in emphasis in mental health care, 'from a focus on treatment to consideration of prevention, early intervention, rehabilitation and recovery'. Reference is made to housing, education, welfare, justice and employment as important considerations in preventing the development of mental health problems and in promoting recovery from mental illness. The NMHP 2003-2008 asserts that mental health should be understood within a population health framework that, 'takes into account the complex influences on mental health, encourages a holistic approach to improving mental health and well being and develops evidence based interventions that meet the identified needs of population groups....' The population health model is comprehensively presented in the Australian National Mental Health Strategy document 'Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health' (PPEI). This document published in 2000 is the theoretical basis upon which much of the NMHP 2003-2008 is premised. It identifies the determinants of health as translating into either risk factors or preventative factors. In the context of mental health, risk factors increase the likelihood that mental illness will develop while protective factors provide people with resilience and moderate the impact of stress thereby reducing the likelihood of mental health problems. Examples given of risk factors include: poverty; family discord; physical, sexual or emotional abuse; poor schooling. Examples of protective factors include: good nutrition; small family size; sense of connectedness.

The Third National Mental Health Plan 2003-2008 demonstrates an understanding of the importance of the role played by NGOs in further developing a population health approach. It promotes NGOs as working beyond the mental health services in providing access to support services that are essential to recovery and community participation. The NMHP recognises the high demand placed on NGOs and acknowledges that their funding base remains limited given their key role in mental health promotion and support. The Third National Mental Health Plan 2003-2008 can be accessed in full at www.mentalhealth.gov.au/resources