



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, AGEING, COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Ms Joy Burch (Chair), Mr Andrew Wall MLA (Deputy Chair), Mr Jayson Hinder MLA, Ms Nicole Lawder MLA

Youth Suicide and Self Harm in the ACT

ANSWER TO QUESTION TAKEN ON NOTICE

Mr Wall: To ask the Minister for Health:

Mr Wall: I asked Ms Berry this question, but I believe it is much more relevant to be asked of you, minister. The numbers of young people with a diagnosis of depression, mental illness, anxiety and the like seem to be increasing. Is it a case of us diagnosing these issues better or is it a symptom of modern society? Is it trending in a direction? What sort of evidence or research has begun, what is available on that and what can be done to try to address it?

Ms Bracher: That is an epidemiological question, which I probably cannot answer in a way that is sufficient for the committee. The chief health officer's report will give data across years in that space. Anecdotally, I hear the same thing—that anxiety and depression are more common; and that question about whether it is diagnosis or help-seeking behaviour is more common. I do not think there is an answer out there in the literature.

Mr Wall: Minister, is there perhaps something you would be able to provide to us on notice in that space?

Mr Corbell: Certainly—

Minister Corbell: The answer to the Member's question is as follows

The evidence about increasing or decreasing numbers of young people with a diagnosis of depression or mental illness shows a complex and mixed picture in which there is both evidence showing no increase in the rates of mental illness as well as increased rates of young people accessing mental health services. This complex and mixed picture is replicated both nationally and internationally. Explanations in the international literature suggest these changes “probably reflect changes in diagnostic practice, mental health literacy, or willingness to report mental health concerns” (Simpson, Meadows, Frances & Patten, 2012, p.324).

Is there an increasing number of young people with mental illness in the ACT?

There is evidence showing no change in the rates of mental illness diagnosis for young people in the ACT.

- Our annual ACT General Health Survey is a telephone survey which asks ACT residents if they been told by a doctor that they have anxiety, depression, a stress related problem and/or any other mental health problem. Data from this survey indicates that there has not been a significant change in mental health diagnosis between 2007 and 2014 for young people in the ACT aged 16 to 29 years.

- The ABS National Health Survey findings show that the proportion of young people aged 18 to 24 in the ACT reporting high or very high psychological distress was similar between 2011-2012 and 2014-2015.

However, there is also evidence demonstrating increased rates of young people accessing mental health services.

- The 2016 Report on Government Services states that between 2005-2006 and 2013-2014, the rate of young ACT people (aged 15 to 24 years) accessing community MH care increased by 31 per cent.
- The hospitalisation rate for mental health treatment of young people living in the ACT (aged 0 to 24 years) increased between 1998-1999 and 2014-2015. The proportion of these hospitalisations attributable to mood disorders (including depression) and anxiety related disorders also increased from 36 per cent to 47 per cent.

How do young people in the ACT compare nationally?

There is evidence showing very little change in the rates of mental illness diagnosis for young people across Australia.

- Prevalence of mental or behavioural conditions (including long term depression and anxiety) between 2007-2008 and 2011-2012 in Australia shows a small increase (approximately 1 per cent), including a small increase in anxiety related problems in 15-24 year olds (also approximately 1 per cent).

However, there is also evidence demonstrating increased rates of young people accessing mental health services across Australia.

- While the rate of young ACT people (aged 15 to 24 years) accessing community MH care increased by 31 per cent, the corresponding increase in the national rate was 62 per cent (Report on Government Services 2016).

There is also evidence suggesting that young people in the ACT access community mental health services at higher rates than nationally.

- The ACT's rate of young people (aged 15-24 yrs) accessing community mental health services between 2005-06 & 2013-14 was approximately three times higher than the national rate (Report on Government Services 2016).

The Acting Chief Psychiatrist has stated a review by Bor et al in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry (2014) suggests there has been an increase in the numbers of young people presenting with mental health concerns, including anxiety and depression in this century compared to last century. ACT Health notes an increase in the number of young people accessing the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service for assessment in relation to a broad range of issues which impact on mental health and wellbeing. The factors which contribute to this increase in rate of presentation may reflect an actual increase in prevalence of disorder, or an increase in awareness of mental health difficulties in children and adolescents, and an increased willingness to seek mental health support.

How does this compare to the international evidence?

While it has not been possible to find evidence relating to young people specifically, the evidence about mental illness reflects this ACT and national evidence.

"Although the burden of mental and substance use disorders increased by 37.6 per cent between 1990 and 2010, for mental disorders this change was almost entirely attributable to population growth and ageing... not much evidence existed to suggest an increase in the prevalence of mental disorders over time."¹

"A perception has emerged that the prevalence of these major depressive episodes (MDE) may be increasing over time. This perception may be attributable to an increase in antidepressant use and an increased frequency of self-reported diagnoses of depression, as well as to a greater awareness of depression within the general public. However, examination of prevalence during a long period of time in a set of nationally representative samples in our study did not identify an increase in prevalence."²

"Major depression prevalence did not change over time. No changes in the frequency of severe distress were seen. However, there were increases in reported diagnoses of mood disorders and an increasing proportion of the population reported that they were taking antidepressants. The proportion of the population reporting that their life was extremely stressful decreased, but the proportion reporting poor mental health did not change. Measures based on assessment of symptoms showed no evidence of change over time. However, the frequency of diagnosis and treatment appears to be increasing and perceptions of extreme stress are decreasing. These changes probably reflect changes in diagnostic practice, mental health literacy, or willingness to report mental health concerns. However, no direct evidence of changing mental health status was found."³

Approved for circulation to the Standing Committee on Health, Ageing and Community Services

Signature:

Date:

5.4.16

By the Minister for Health, Mr Simon Corbell MLA

¹ Whiteford, H.A., Degenhardt, L., Rehm, J., Baxter, A.J., Ferrari, A.J., Erskine, H., Charlson, F.J., Norman, R.E., Flaxman, A.D., Johns, N., Burstein, R., Murray, C.L.J. & Vos, T. 2013. Global burden of disease attributable to mental and substance use disorders: findings from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2010. *Lancet*, 382, 1575-1586.

² Patten, S.B., Williams, J.V.A., Lavorato, D.H., Fiest, K.M., Bulloch, A.G.M. & Wang, J. 2015. The prevalence of major depression is not changing. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 60(1), 31-34.

³ Simpson, K.R.S., Meadows, G.N., Frances, A.J. & Patten, S.B. 2012. Is mental health in the Canadian population changing over time? *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 57(5), 324-31.