

# The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people

February 2013

## Transition to adulthood

The Commissioner for Children and Young Western Australia (WA) undertook an Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (the Inquiry) after hearing consistently from communities across the State about their concerns for the mental health of their children and young people, from infants to young adults.

The *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia* was tabled in Parliament in May 2011.

This policy brief focuses on young people with mental health problems and disorders as they transition to adulthood. Although the Commissioner for Children and Young People's statutory responsibility does not extend to young people beyond 18 years of age, this transitional period is critical in the effective delivery of mental health services for young people.

The *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing 2007* found that more than one in four young people aged 16 to 24 years experienced a mental disorder in the previous 12 months. This is a higher prevalence than in any other age group.<sup>1</sup>

Adolescence is characterised by the growth of the child towards cognitive and physical maturity.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the adolescent years, the brain is still in the process of developing and it is now widely accepted that this process continues into the 20s.<sup>3</sup>

The transition period from adolescence to adulthood, with all the social and emotional adjustments that this requires, is long and varies between individuals depending on their own developmental trajectory.

This has implications for the design of appropriate service delivery for young people in this age range.

### What do young people say?

Young people identify a number of barriers to seeking professional help including stigma, lack of confidentiality, feeling embarrassed about what a professional might think and a lack of sensitive and locally accessible services.<sup>4</sup>

Children and young people reported to the Inquiry that sometimes they do not feel acknowledged, valued and listened to, including when they are seeking help. They wanted to have their opinions heard and to be treated with respect.<sup>5</sup>

*"The doctors should listen more, they just make notes and don't tell me anything."* young person<sup>6</sup>

*"I think some places see young people with mental health issues as being a 'phase' and therefore do not treat it as a serious matter."* girl 17<sup>7</sup>



Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Western Australia

Some young people with multiple or complex issues felt that their individual needs were not acknowledged or considered and that services were not equipped to help them.<sup>8</sup>

*"Being teased by the nurses because of my nature and the circumstances of being sent there did not improve my mental health."* female 20<sup>9</sup>

This indicates the need for services that are responsive to young people, not only when a service is first provided but as the transition is made to adult services.

## What were the Inquiry findings?

Key findings relating to the transition to adulthood include:

- Developmentally-appropriate health care services should continue uninterrupted as a person moves from adolescence to adulthood.<sup>10</sup>
- Periods of transition are a known risk factor for mental health problems, as are a lack of support services.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore critical for young people with mental illness that any transition from a child-focused service to an adult-focused service is smooth and consistent.<sup>12</sup>
- Transitional processes in place in WA mental health services are often abrupt and based on the age of the young person rather than individual developmental needs. The age young people are required to attend or transition to an adult service for treatment can vary from between 16 to 18 years of age depending on the mental health service.<sup>13</sup>
- Smooth transitional processes are particularly important for young people with complex needs, with co-morbid disorders including drug and alcohol problems, and those who do not have strong family supports, such as children in the care of the Department for Child Protection.<sup>14</sup>
- The consequences of a 'failed transition' include the young person disengaging from mental health services, poor continuity of care, a reliance on crisis services and the young person 'falling through the gap'.<sup>15</sup>
- Adult mental health services are often inappropriate for the needs of young people, as they can be '*frightening*'<sup>16</sup> and '*not youth friendly or suitable for young people with acquired brain injuries and developmental delays*'.<sup>17</sup>
- Youth-friendly service models (such as headspace and YouthReach South) successfully meet the needs of young people transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. This model of service is characterised by co-located, multi-disciplinary and integrated services which are accessible, flexible, confidential and focused on individual needs.<sup>18</sup>
- Existing adolescent mental health services need to be provided with the resources, policy and support to develop a flexible and developmental approach to transition.<sup>19</sup>
- Successful transition is characterised by being appropriately timed for the individual, planned well in advance, coordinated and continuous, and occurs in consultation with the young person, their families and carers.<sup>20</sup>



Key recommendations of the Inquiry relevant to young people with mental health problems and disorders as they transition to adulthood:

**Recommendation 47:** The Mental Health Commission coordinate the establishment of co-located 'youth service centres' across the State.<sup>21</sup>

**Recommendation 48:** Confidentiality, wherever possible, should be a critical consideration in the design and operation of services and programs, to encourage young people to seek help with issues concerning their mental health and wellbeing.<sup>22</sup>

**Recommendation 50:** Planning for the new Children's Hospital should include comprehensive therapeutic services for children and young people with mental illness, and be able to accommodate and support young people up to 25 years of age where developmentally and clinically appropriate.<sup>23</sup>

**Recommendation 52:** A short-term residential facility for young people being discharged from acute in-patient care be made available, as a 'step-down' from hospital care when appropriate.<sup>24</sup>

**Recommendation 54:** Transition strategies for young people moving into adult services be developed and implemented between services to ensure the individual is supported and continuity of care is maintained.<sup>25</sup>

## What is being done?

A number of developments relevant to young people with mental health problems and disorders as they transition to adulthood have occurred since the Inquiry:

- The Mental Health Commission has developed a 10-year strategic policy, *Mental Health 2020: Making it personal and everybody's business* which describes a new and comprehensive 'youth-stream approach' which has as a priority individualised planning and coordinated approaches to service provision.<sup>26</sup>
- The Mental Health Commission has funded the Department of Health to develop a multidisciplinary brief intervention service for young people 16 to 24 years of age. Planning for this service is underway.<sup>27</sup>
- The Department of Health has commenced planning for a dedicated youth mental health stream within Adult Mental Health Services.<sup>28</sup>
- Commonwealth government funding has allowed for the establishment of more *headspace* youth mental health sites in WA, with the opening of headspace Perth and centres planned for Midland, Bunbury, Rockingham and Joondalup.<sup>29 30</sup>
- Subacute mental health services are being developed in Joondalup, Rockingham and Broome, including for young people over 16 years.<sup>31 32</sup>

## What more needs to be done?

To improve the transition of young people with mental health problems and disorders to adult services the following is required:

- A young person's treatment, support and discharge plan ensures continuity of services and includes transition to adult services and planning for education, accommodation and other support services as needed.



- Transition strategies for young people moving from child and adolescent services to youth mental health services and from youth services into adult services be developed and implemented to ensure individuals are supported and continuity of care is maintained at all transition points.
- Mental health services actively engage with the young person, their parents, family and/or carers and other service providers to ensure continuity of care between in-patient and community-based services and government and non-government services.
- Relevant recommendations from the *Review of the admission or referral to and discharge and transfer practices of public mental health facilities/services in Western Australia* are implemented.<sup>33</sup>
- The National Mental Health Commission's recommendation that *'No one should be discharged from hospitals, custodial care, mental health or drug and alcohol related treatment services into homelessness'* and that *'Access to stable and safe places to live must increase.'*<sup>34</sup> be progressed.

## Other relevant information

### Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

- The following publications are available on the Commissioner for Children and Young People's website at [www.ccyp.wa.gov.au](http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au)
  - *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*
  - *Speaking out about mental health: The views of Western Australian children and young people*

### Mental Health Commission, Western Australia

- The Mental Health Commission's strategic policy *Mental Health 2020: Making it personal and everybody's business* and the *Action Plan 2011-2012* are available at: [www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au](http://www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au)
- Professor Bryant Stokes' *Review of the admission or referral to and discharge and transfer practices of public mental health facilities/services in Western Australia* is also available on the Mental health Commission website: [www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au/media\\_resources/policies/stokes.aspx](http://www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au/media_resources/policies/stokes.aspx)

### National Mental Health Commission

- *A Contributing Life: The 2012 National Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention* is available at: [www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/our-report-card.aspx](http://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/our-report-card.aspx)

### Council of Australian Governments (COAG)

- *The Roadmap for National Mental Health Reform 2012–22* is available at: [www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/The%20Roadmap%20for%20National%20Mental%20Health%20Reform%202012-2022.pdf.pdf](http://www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/The%20Roadmap%20for%20National%20Mental%20Health%20Reform%202012-2022.pdf.pdf)



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- <sup>1</sup> Slade T et al. 2009, *The Mental Health of Australians 2: Report on the 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*, Department of Health and Ageing, Canberra, p. xii.
- <sup>2</sup> Sawyer M et al. 2000, *Mental Health of Young People in Australia: Child and Adolescent Component of the National Survey of Mental Health and Well-Being*, Mental Health and Special Programs Branch, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra, p. 12.
- <sup>3</sup> Bennet D 2007, 'Adolescent development & risk-taking', *YAPRap* [online], February 2007, <http://www.yapa.org.au/youthwork/young/devrisk.php>
- <sup>4</sup> Submission 90 from Inspire Foundation to the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA's Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia.
- <sup>5</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2011, *Speaking out about mental health: The views of Western Australian children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p.11.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.11.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.11.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.11.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.11.
- <sup>10</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2011, *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p.157.
- <sup>11</sup> Mental Health and Special Programs Branch 2000, *Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health: A Monograph*, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra, p. 15.
- <sup>12</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2011, *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p.157.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp.157–158.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.158.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.158.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.158.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.159.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp.147–148, 159.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.160.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.160.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.148.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.149.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.153.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.155.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.160.
- <sup>26</sup> Mental Health Commission 2011, *Mental Health 2020: Making it personal and everybody's business*, Mental Health Commission, Perth, pp. 33–34.
- <sup>27</sup> Mental Health Commission 2012, *Action Plan 2011–2012*, Mental Health Commission, Perth, p. 18.
- <sup>28</sup> Report from Minister Helen Morton to the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia: Overview of progress*, April 2012, p. 5.
- <sup>29</sup> headspace, *headspace centre expansion*, [website], viewed 5 December 2012, <http://www.headspace.org.au/media/248603/information%20session%20presentation.pdf>
- <sup>30</sup> headspace, *headspace welcomes announcement of next 15 centre locations*, [website], viewed 5 December 2012, <http://www.headspace.org.au/about-headspace/media-centre/media-releases/headspace-welcomes-announcement-of-next-15-centre-locations>
- <sup>31</sup> Report from Minister Helen Morton to the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia: Overview of progress*, April 2012. p. 8.
- <sup>32</sup> Morton H 2012, *Contract awarded for first subacute service*, Ministerial Media Statements, 29 November 2012, <http://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/pages/StatementDetails.aspx?listName=StatementsBarnett&StatId=6856>
- <sup>33</sup> Stokes B 2012, *Review of the admission or referral to and the discharge and transfer practices of public mental health facilities/services in Western Australia*, Department of Health & Mental Health Commission, Perth.
- <sup>34</sup> National Mental Health Commission 2012, *A Contributing Life: the 2012 National Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention*, National Mental Health Commission, Sydney.

