Better access to nutrition care for mental health needed - Media release

Failing to provide better access for Australians to seek nutrition support will only further exacerbate mental illness.

That's one of the key messages highlighted by Dietitians Australia at today's hearing for the Select Committee Inquiry into Mental Health and Suicide Prevention.

Presenting to the committee, Dietitians Australia President Tara Diversi and leading mental health Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) Professor Tracy Burrows and Dr Tetyana Rocks called for nutrition care to be elevated in mental health services.

"While the Medicare Better Access Initiative for mental health provides funded visits to other allied health professionals such as occupational therapists and social workers, APDs are currently excluded. This means Australians do not have access to all the support they need to manage their mental health," said Tara Diversi, President of Dietitians Australia.

"At today's hearing, we called for the Government to provide Australians with greater access to nutrition services through Medicare and government funded initiatives.

"Food and mood have a reciprocal relationship and being able to see a dietitian for both prevention and treatment, means more Australians can be equipped with essential skills to opt for foods that promote wellness and emotional resilience.

"This would also increase awareness of the role of nutrition in mental health and ensure the responsibility for nutrition advice doesn't fall solely on other health professionals, who are already at capacity providing their core medical care."

80% of people living with mental illness also have a physical illness which can be treated through dietary intervention. APDs are health professionals with the skills to deliver cost-effective medical nutrition therapy for both physical and mental health conditions.

“Higher diet quality – including foods such as fruits, vegetables and wholegrains – supports healthy brain function and better mental health. On the flip side, energy dense, nutrient poor options, that provide little in the way of health, only worsen mental illness,” Tara said.

“For those experiencing mental illness, medications, energy levels, stigma and self-esteem are just some of the many factors that can reduce the ability for a person to plan, access, prepare and consume nutritious foods.

“As we continue to live with the impacts of the 2019 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to ensure all Australians can access dietetic support to prevent, treat and manage their mental health.”

Today was the last of the Select Committee’s public hearings, before a final report is handed down in November. The Committee will also draw upon findings of a range of recent reports including the Productivity Commission Inquiry Report into Mental Health, National Mental Health Workforce Strategy and consider current events impacting mental health.

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Media enquiries

For media enquiries and interviews, contact our Media Officer on 0409 661 920.

Note to editors: Dietitians Australia is the leading voice of nutrition in Australia, representing dietitians nationally and advocating for healthier communities. Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) is the only national credential recognised by the Australian Government as the quality standard for nutrition and dietetics services in Australia.