Mental Health Australia

Regional Data Hub Consultation

Mental Health Australia supports the Bureau of Communications, Arts and Regional Research to improve the evidence base for regional communities, local leaders, industry and all levels of government through the Regional data hub. Accurate, transparent and granular data underpins practical and robust advice to government on systemic reform in mental health. This submission responds directly to questions posed in the consultation paper and provides key recommendations to assist the Bureau to ensure the Regional Data Hub is able to effectively support whole of system design, planning, implementation and evaluation.

What data do you use? What data do you need?

Mental Health Australia welcomes progress already made by governments in improving access to regional data. In particular, Mental Health Australia supports the inclusion of 'psychological distress' and 'suicide rate' indicators in the 'Progress in Australian Regions' dashboard. There are multiple opportunities to expand on this important first step to ensure the proposed Regional Data Hub supports organisations and governments in policy, planning, implementation and evaluation.

Mental Health Australia is the peak, national non-government organisation representing and promoting the interests of the Australian mental health sector. As such, Mental Health Australia uses data to inform systemic policy advice to government. "Data and evidence are central to advancing and improving regional mental health planning and mental health reform."[1] Among other benefits regional data enables Mental Health Australia to interrogate issues to discover whether they are discrete or location specific problems or a systemic issues requiring a systemic resolution.

As mental health is impacted by, and impacts upon, a range of social determinants, Mental Health Australia accesses a wide variety of social, health and economic data sets, including around illness and wellbeing prevalence, service provision, workforce and expenditure. This can include access to Australian Bureau of Statistics and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare generated data, however, it can also include data generated by Mental Health Australia members. For example, as a part of the Optimising Psychosocial Supports project Mental Health Australia collated for the first time detailed service level data from community based mental health organisations to present a picture of how people with psychosocial disability were supported in pre-National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) programs. The project provided a rich and valuable evidence base to augment and support the National Disability Insurance Agency's work to deliver the most appropriate support to NDIS participants with psychosocial disability.

Data also underpins effective systemic planning. Primary Health Networks (PHNs) and their state and territory equivalents, all use regional data to inform formal planning for, and subsequent commissioning of, mental health services in their regions. A review of the PHN commissioning of mental health services found that "integration of regional data sources remains a barrier to accelerating a comprehensive view of population mental health needs".[2] PHNs currently use the National Mental Health Services Planning Framework and enlist the help of consultants to assist with service mapping and planning of mental health services in their region. Increasing the access to integrated regional data on prevalence, service provision, workforce and expenditure would assist PHNs to undertake more accurate planning, which is sensitive to local need.

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[1] PHN Advisory Panel on Mental Health (2018) *Report of the PHN Advisory Panel on Mental Health,* Retrieved 30 June 2021 from https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/PHN-Mental_Tools, p. 12
[2] PHN Advisory Panel on Mental Health (2018) *Report of the PHN Advisory Panel on Mental Health*, Retrieved 30 June 2021 from https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/PHN-Mental_Tools, p. 5

Now is a critical time to ensure Governments have access to the data and data analysis tools required to undertake effective local service planning. In the 2021 Budget, the Australian Government announced a $487.2 million investment in adult mental health treatment centres and $54.2 million for up to 15 new children's mental health and wellbeing centres.[3] Robust planning (informed by accurate regional data) and effective integration with existing services will be critical factors in the success of these new services.

Given there are multiple bodies, which undertake planning of mental health services, it would be useful for organisations to have access to data that can be broken down via differing regional boundaries using the Australian Statistical Geography Standard as a framework. For mental health service planning purposes it is useful if data can be broken down by Local Government Areas, Primary Health Network boundaries, Local Health District (or equivalent) boundaries, postcodes, electorates and states and compared via remoteness.

The 'Progress in Australian Regions' dashboard currently contains a good range of social and demographic information. While, Mental Health Australia welcomes the presence of indicators such as 'psychological distress' and 'suicide rate' in the dashboard. These wellbeing indicators cannot be broken down to regions smaller than the state level. Although this is not an issue for the current consultation process to resolve, the success of the Regional Data Hub will rely on being able to feed data into the Regional Data Hub at a sufficiently granular level to enable comparisons between regions. Therefore, it may be in the Bureau's interest to advocate to improve granularity and regularity of data collection across the indicators it chooses to report on.

For national mental health planning purposes, in addition to prevalence and social and other demographic indicators already available in the existing 'Progress in Australian Regions' dashboard, it would also be useful to include service provision and expenditure data for example that, which is used to inform the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's Mental health services in Australia publications. Unfortunately Mental Health Australia acknowledges there are large data gaps, which will prevent this recommendation from being implemented. For example, the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health highlighted data gaps in:

- "prevalence and service utilisation data that is outdated
- mental health services provided by NGOs [Non-Government Organisations] and MBS [Medicare Benefits Schedule]-rebated providers (psychologists and psychiatrists)
- particular demographic groups
- non-health sectors"[4]

In addition, the recent review of PHNs' implementation of mental health commissioning found "There remains a challenge for PHNs to access relevant regional and local level data, as in some cases, the data does not exist at regional or local level, or is not shared by state and territory authorities (in spite of Fifth Plan commitments)."[5]

Recommendation 1:

Expand data captured in the regional data hub to also include mental health service provision, workforce and expenditure data, where existing data gaps do not preclude implementation of this recommendation.

Recommendation 2:

Advocate to improve granularity of data captured in regional data hubs to ensure mental health related indicators (such as the existing 'psychological distress' and 'suicide rate' indicators) are comparable across multiple boundaries using the Australian Statistical Geography Standard as a framework.

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[3] Department of Health (2021) *Prioritising Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (Pillar 3) – Treatment*, Retrieved on 2 July 2021 from https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/05/prioritising-mental-health-and-suicide-prevention-pillar-3-treatment_0.pdf

[4] Productivity Commission (2020) *Mental Health: Productivity Commission Inquiry Report: Volume 3. No.95,* p. 1196

[5] PHN Advisory Panel on Mental Health (2018) *Report of the PHN Advisory Panel on Mental Health, Retrieved 30 June 2021 from https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/PHN-Mental_Tools, p. 7*

How do you want to access data?

Mental Health Australia currently accesses regional data (which isn't already available through the Australian Government's Regional Data Hub) through the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australian Bureau of Statistics website or via special request to these organisations. In relation to more specific topics Mental Health Australia also makes special requests to other government agencies for data broken down by region.

It is preferable that as much relevant regional data as possible is made publicly available and accessible through the Regional Data Hub to increase transparency of that data to the community in general and to improve government and non-government capacity for service planning, implementation and evaluation.

More specifically access to raw data is critical so that it can be interrogated and analysed to support sound policy development and advice to governments. In addition, the hub will only become more useful as its graph and table building functionality is improved. For example, the current 'Progress in Australian Regions' dashboard could be improved through enabling the inclusion of more than one indicator in the graphs it generates through the website. This is particularly useful in investigating demographic indicators alongside mental health and wellbeing indicators.

Mental Health Australia would also support the provision of generated reports on specific topics such as psychological distress and suicide rates across the nation. The report could analyse a comparison of these indicators across different regions and investigate related social determinants or demographic indicators.

Recommendation 3

Improve table generation functionality, for example the 'Progress in Australian Regions' dashboard could be improved by:

- enabling more than one indicator to be compared for a specific region
- improving data granularity, particularly in relation to 'psychological distress' and 'suicide rate' indicators so that tables can compare these indicators across regions.

Recommendation 4

The Regional Data Hub should create reports on specific topics, interrogating subject specific data and/or region specific data, starting with a report on psychological distress and suicide rates.

Do you have data to share?

Although Mental Health Australia does call on members from time to time to contribute data to specific projects, generating and/or sharing raw data is not a core function. In addition to the use of data to inform our own purposes (i.e. to inform systemic policy advocacy), Mental Health Australia advocates for better access to, sharing and use of data within the mental health system as a whole. This is exemplified through Mental Health Australia's role as part of the Australian Government's Mental Health Information Strategy Standing Committee.

There are some systemically based data gathering processes, from which the Regional Data Hub could draw recent, accurate and potentially regional data. For example, on 10 February 2021 the Minister for Health announced the National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing was underway with the first results expected by the end of 2021.[6] In addition, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's data sets around mental health service delivery and expenditure may be useful to consider for inclusion, however many indicators in this data set may not yet be able to broken down to a more granular level than the State and Territory level.

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[6] The Hon. Greg Hunt, MP, (2021) *National study of mental health and wellbeing gets underway.* Retrieved on 1 July 2021 from https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-greg-hunt-mp/media/national-study-of-mental-health-and-wellbeing-gets-underway

Recommendation 5

Data collected through the National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing and data collected by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare on mental health service delivery and expenditure should be considered for inclusion in the Regional Data Hub.

Conclusion

Mental Health Australia will support any project that aims for greater sharing of relevant data broken down into regions. Greater regional data sharing will lead to better policy development, planning and better allocation of resources in mental health. The Regional Data Hub has the potential to make a significant contribution toward this goal.