

Summary - Emerging trends post COVID-19 restrictions for WA families with infants and young children

The Perinatal and Infant Mental Health (PIMH) Subnetwork Steering Committee has submitted its final report and recommendations on the “Emerging trends post COVID-19 restrictions for WA families with infants and young children” to the Mental Health Network Executive Advisory Group. Once approved, the full report will be made available on the Mental Health Commission website.

As a summary, the report provided a snapshot of the concerns and thoughts of consumers, health professionals and community workers. The survey was well received with 81 responses submitted over a two week period. The largest group of respondents were front-line primary health workers, such as those working in child health, infant health or maternity care (41%, n=33), followed by ‘other community workers’, such as local government and community service workers (25%, n=20). The consumer group was inclusive of those with lived experience, carers, support persons, and consumer representatives (19%, n=16) and the management/treatment worker group consisted of mental health clinicians and general practice staff (15%, n=12). Most of the respondents lived or worked in the Perth metropolitan area (65%, n=54), followed by rural areas (25%, n=21) and the remaining in remote areas (10%, n=8), with some working across multiple settings.

Consumer / carer / support person group

Overall, the consumer group clearly expressed concerns about the increased anxiety, stress and isolation being experienced and its detrimental impact on families with infants and young children, even more so for families with special needs children. The use of information technology (videoconference, Telehealth, phone appointments and digital communication platforms) as a substitute for services and supports was welcomed, however did not replace the face-to-face contact with health professionals, support workers and extended family and friends. This was evident in the frequency in which the topic of parenting support groups was raised and its importance to emotional health and wellbeing for new parents. Respondents were keen for improved access to, and provision of, mental health services, social support services and peer support requiring a commitment to increased funding and staff capacity.

Primary health worker group

Front line primary health workers, such as midwives and child health/infant mental health workers, provided their clients with a level of reassurance in uncertain times and in the absence of other support services. The loss of a clients’ social contact with family, friends, services and community connections was clear and very concerning for primary health workers. The use of technology provided alternative

service delivery options and the opportunity for creative solutions to maintain support for new families. For some workers however, this was also a frustrating experience with access, equipment and connectivity problems, as well as the need for upskilling in this new mode of delivering services.

There was support for establishing mental health service input as part of the antenatal care team, as well as earlier mental health support and intervention to prevent crisis situations, in the postnatal period. Changes to Commonwealth funded programs such as session extension for psychology services under the Better Outcomes and Mental Health Plan were also suggested.

Management/treatment worker group

Clinicians working with mentally unwell or vulnerable clients raised concerns about increased parental anxiety and the detrimental effects of isolation from family, friends and supports, as well as deterioration in their client's condition. The respondents felt this was compounded by the reduction or cessation of much needed support services, together with access to treatment during the restriction period. As a result, waiting lists and service demand increased once restrictions were lifted. Telehealth and telephone services provided some continued contact and support for clients and mostly worked well, however some difficulties were encountered such as unanswered phones, unreliable connectivity and confidentiality issues within the family home. Respondents in this group felt having face-to-face contact with the client was essential to ensure clinical accuracy together with the ability to provide therapeutic counselling. Telehealth service delivery was well supported as it provided an alternative option, however was not ideal.

This group is keen for resources to be improved for mental health services to meet the demand, particularly for very unwell patients. The workload strain and excessive demand on services would likely impact on staff health and wellbeing.

Other community worker group

As with the other groups, similar trends have been reported regarding increased parental anxiety and stress, isolation and limited or no access to services. This group however raised more concerns in respect to social dysfunction and community wellbeing. Many of the strategies already being used by local government and social services workers, such as online resources for local communities, have been innovative. As with other groups, many called for an increase in resources and funding targeting mental health and wellbeing for all community members, but in particular those in greatest need.

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