

# About primary mental health care

## What is primary health care?

In Australia, primary health care is typically the first contact an individual with a health concern has with the health system<sup>1</sup>.

Primary health care is often delivered by a general practitioner (GP) and covers health care that is not related to a hospital visit. This may include visiting a GP for treatment of symptoms of a cold or a physical injury.

90 per cent of Australians see a GP at least once a year<sup>2</sup>. GPs consistently report psychological issues to be the most common health presentations they manage<sup>3</sup>. GPs are the most frequently contacted health professional by people engaging in suicidal behaviour<sup>4</sup>.

Primary health care services are delivered in settings such as general practices, community health centres, allied health practices, and via communication technologies such as telehealth and video consultations<sup>5</sup>.

Primary health care differs from secondary care, which relates to care that is delivered by a specialist doctor or health professional.

## General practice

General practice has a role in the continuing care of people who have experienced mental ill- health,

irrespective of the severity of the mental illness<sup>1</sup>.

The World Health Organisation has specified that primary care for mental health is an essential component of any well-functioning health system<sup>6</sup>.

GPs are often the first service an individual will see, when experiencing mental health issues for the first time. GPs can provide mental health treatment, such as undertaking a holistic assessment looking at both mental health and physical health.

GPs can also make a diagnosis, prescribe medications, and give information and advice on non-treatment options such as:

- how to reduce stress
- how to get restful sleep
- exercise
- nutrition<sup>7</sup>.

GPs may not be mental health specialists and may refer patients to secondary care to receive specialised support, if required. They may also inform the individual of supports available from community organisations, to assist them with their recovery.

1 Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *Primary Health Care – Overview*. Sourced from website: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/health-welfare-services/primary-health-care/overview>. Accessed 1 April 2020

2 Department of Health. *Annual Medicare statistics – Financial year 1984–85 to 2017–18*. Canberra. 2018

3 Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. *General Practice: Health of the Nation 2019*. East Melbourne, Victoria. 2019

4 Pfaff, Acres, Wilson. *The role of general practitioners in parasuicide: A Western Australia perspective*. *Archives of Suicide Research*; 5:207-14.1999.

5 Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: *Primary Health Care – About*. Sourced from website: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/health-welfare-services/primary-health-care/about>. Accessed 1 April 2020

6 World Health Organisation. *Integrating Mental Health into Primary Care: A Global Perspective*. 2008.

7 Rethink Mental Illness. *GPs – What to expect from your doctor*. Sourced from website: <https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/treatment-and-support/gps-what-to-expect-from-your-doctor/> Accessed 1 July 2020

Many people who have been seriously affected by mental illness manage their illness with only the support of a GP<sup>8</sup>.

A GP may provide ongoing support and information, particularly if an individual does not receive support from specialist mental health services.

A person with longer term mental health issues may have received support in a hospital but no longer needs that level of support. Their mental health support needs may now be met via support from their GP.

### Better Access Initiative

The Medicare Benefit Scheme (MBS) Better Access Initiative provides subsidised mental health care for Australians. The initiative allows GPs to refer people with a mental health care plan for counselling to clinical psychologists, psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists who are registered with Medicare.

In 2017-18 2.5 million people received Medicare-subsidised mental health-specific services, with GPs providing the greatest proportion of these MBS services<sup>9</sup>.

### Primary Health Networks

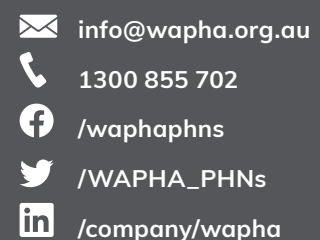
Primary Health Networks (PHNs) are funded by the Commonwealth Government to commission services to ensure underserved groups (including people living in rural and remote area) have access to similar care offered by the Better Access Initiative.

PHNs engage with local communities to understand what primary care services would make a difference. PHNs support GPs to continuously improve the care they provide.

PHNs also have a role in helping to better integrate the local health system to improve patient care and experience.

8 Department of Health: *The role of primary care including general practice*: <https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/mental-pubs-p-mono-toc~mental-pubs-p-mono-bas~mental-pubs-p-mono-bas-acc-mental-pubs-p-mono-bas-acc-pri>. Accessed 1 April 2020.

9 AIHW 2019. *Mental health services – in brief 2019*. Cat. no. HSE 228. Canberra



This is one of a series of factsheets regarding mental health and primary health care, developed by WAPHA. Further factsheets and other resources can be found at [www.wapha.org.au/mental-health-framework](http://www.wapha.org.au/mental-health-framework). The information in this factsheet is current at Decemebr 2020.