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Queensland Schizophrenia Research Foundation

For immediate release

Will Queensland's youth mental health care be sabotaged by merchants of doubt?

Parents and mental health service providers around the State should be on the defensive following public attack made by Allen Frances, a retired academic psychiatrist from the US, on Australia's youth mental health service innovations.

With 97% of Australia's young people with a mental disorder not accessing specialist mental health services, the Queensland Schizophrenia Research Foundation (QSRF) sees the latest attacks on mental health care innovation as regressive and short sighted, and provides no proactive, alternative solutions.

In statements made online and in subsequent interviews, Frances, a retired professor and former chairman of the American Psychiatric Association's classification system of mental disorders (DSM), has criticised both the early intervention service models and the Government's investment in our young people's mental health as a "vast untried public health experiment"; an ironic statement given the poor state of mental health services in the USA.

While Frances and counterparts have been busy making public assumptions about the quality of existing and proposed mental health services and early psychosis interventions for young people, Australian psychiatrists like Professor Pat McGorry and Professor Stan Catts have been busy developing new, innovative ways to engage and treat the next generation of Australians.

Professor Stan Catts, Trustee of the QSRF, strongly supports the youth models of care that the Government is investing in, but more research must be done to develop pre-emptive treatments.

"There is no doubt that early psychosis intervention is effective. Well developed early psychosis services attract into care four times the number of untreated cases that standard services do. Highest level evidence shows early psychosis services reduce the risk of early relapse. And it is more cost effective; early intervention services actually costs less than delayed intervention offered by standard services."

"Like the climate change debate, it is difficult to get universal consensus on service reform, especially in a field like mental health where research is poorly funded. What nobody debates, however, is the urgent need for better services." Professor Catts continued.

As pointed out by Professor Pat McGorry, the \$400m federal budget item for youth mental health and early psychosis which US Professor Frances criticised is actually vital funding for a broader range of services and a long overdue step in addressing the unmet need. Given that 75% of all life time mental health disorders start before age of 25 years, the Queensland public should on high alert of critics of youth mental health service innovations such as those championed by Professor McGorry.

“If the Australian Government is to be criticised for anything, it is for their inadequate funding of research into high quality service evaluation, and youth mental health research that could discover the assessment tools and treatments that would pre-empt the onset of disorders. Indeed, it is incumbent on the Australian Government to invest more in mental health research as Australia leads the world in youth health service innovation and must develop this to world best practice for dissemination internationally.” Professor Catts said.

Catts thinks it’s just sour grapes that an American psychiatrist would criticise our investment in youth mental health as the US is lagging so badly behind in this field.

The QSRF regards the suggestions made by Frances and his Australian supporters as a sure-fire way to put Queensland lives at risk. Currently, 1 in 10 teenagers make a serious, deliberate attempt to end their life. In any given hour, 80 young people in Queensland attempt suicide.

Professor Catts believes that delaying the introduction of promising new services until there is irrefutable effectiveness evidence, as implied by Frances, holds the field hostage to government’s failure to fund the research to obtain the highest level of scientific evidence. A better way is to implement a number of different youth service models and fund the evaluation necessary to compare outcomes and identify best practice.

“The public needs to be aware that there will always be fence-sitters and reactionary cynics to any innovation. But this should be a wake-up call for Australian community and if it doesn’t respond, it will be our young people who pay the price.”

The Queensland Schizophrenia Research Foundation is a charity foundation established to promote, support and fund research initiatives which focus on the detection, prevention and treatment of serious mental health disorders, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

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