

# Review of Physical and Mental Health Care in Australia

A report by Lived Experience Australia Ltd and Equally Well

## Introduction

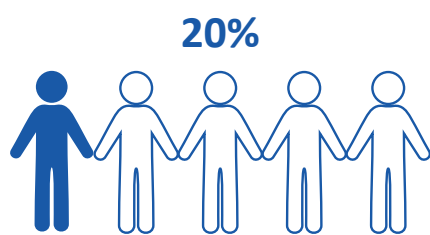
This research investigated the level of support and focus from health professionals and mental health professionals on the physical health needs of people living with mental ill-health. This national research project was conducted as a partnership between Lived Experience Australia (LEA) and Equally Well (EW).

People living with mental ill-health die, on average, 20 years earlier than the rest of the population. Improving the physical health of people living with mental ill-health is therefore a priority in the [Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan](#) and the [Equally Well National Consensus Statement](#). It is also a 'Priority Reform' and 'Start Now' reform of the Productivity Commission Mental Health Inquiry Report.

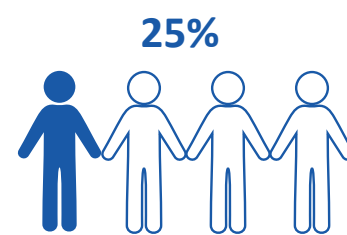
Almost all respondents in this survey had seen a health professional of some sort in the previous 12 months, and over two thirds had seen a mental health professional. The survey results indicate that multiple opportunities to prevent the unnecessary and preventable early death of people living with mental ill-health are being missed. Each of these occasions of service represents an opportunity for physical health promotion, screening and care. However, in most instances consumers and carers report that mental health professionals did not ask or inquire about the physical health of consumers. The results of this research indicate health professionals are failing to adequately pay attention to the physical health concerns of people living with mental ill-health. This failure is resulting in significant costs to the health and wellbeing of consumers, their carers, and to the Australian health system overall.

## Health Professionals inquiring about physical health needs

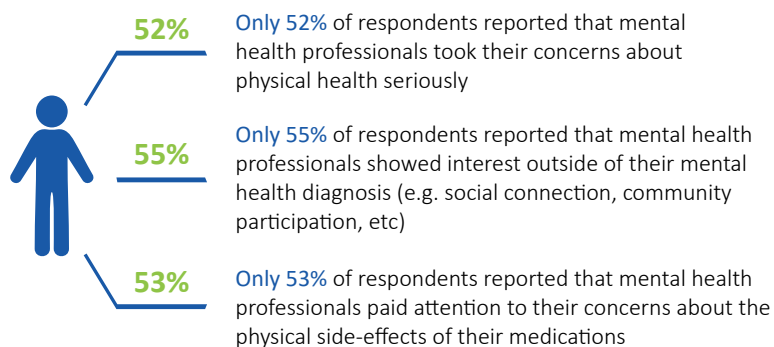
Consumers and carers are generally not asked about their physical health by mental health professionals. Only 23% of smokers were asked about their smoking by a mental health professional and only 8% of the total sample of respondents were asked about cancer screenings.



Only 1 in 5 consumers reported their mental health professional asking about their physical health



Only 1 in 4 carers reported mental health professional asking about the physical health of the person they support



“A huge barrier to getting physical health care for myself and others struggling with mental ill-health is being dismissed, or fear of being dismissed. It's very common that once you have a psychiatric diagnosis, any physical complaint you have is [assumed to be] either your anxiety, in your head, a manifestation of your true feelings or a side effect of your medication. These are possibilities to consider, sure, but patients know their bodies and deserve to be listened to.”

General Practitioners (GPs) and allied health professionals enquire more frequently, however there are still gaps apparent.

84% of GPs and 81% of allied health professionals asked about the physical health of those with mental ill-health conditions. This result is perhaps not surprising given the broader nature of services provided by these health professionals. However, survey responses suggest that there is still a significant proportion of the population who are not being asked or screened for basic physical health risks such as cancer screenings (47%). Only 35% of consumers who were likely smokers were asked about their smoking.

## Where people access health information

Consumers rated their highest preference for receiving information as coming directly from health professionals/support workers, online resources and in-person workshops. This suggests that conversations about physical health and lifestyle concerns from health professionals would be welcomed by consumers and carers. However, over **80% of consumers reported also using Google** for information about physical health care needs.

## Carers are largely excluded from the consumers care planning and delivery



Family members (carers) were identified by 38% of consumers and over half of carers as providing the most support to the consumer regarding their physical health. However, only 49% of consumers reported mental health professionals including their family members in their own care planning or provision.

Similarly, only 33% of carers indicated that the mental health professional included them (carers) in the physical health care of the person they support.

Carers often have a lifetime of expertise in supporting their family member. This is a significant missed opportunity to supplement, support and enhance the holistic person-centred care of people living with mental ill-health.

## Affordability and access to mental health and physical health care is still a challenge

The research revealed a significant gap in access and affordability of services for people with mental-ill health. Affordability was a common barrier to accessing mental health care, and consumers reported being unable to access health professionals to support their physical health care at the level required. While there was no significant difference in affordability of mental health services across states, access challenges were more pronounced in rural and regional settings.



“Access to health professionals can often be limited in rural areas. At this time, one is unable to get an appointment because there are so few psychologists. Also, the GP is unable to offer a longer appointment for extended discussion [due to high demand for appointments]. Most appointments are less than 15 minutes. So, the exercise is kind of tick and script!”

## Reported side effects of mental health medications

Physical side effects of medications were a problem reported by 19% of consumers and 38% of carers. The most common side effects reported included weight gain/obesity and diabetes. Some consumer respondents also described the cumulative impacts of their physical health conditions such as losing their teeth due to mouth dryness from medication. However, only half of consumers reported having their concerns about medications respected and listened to by mental health professionals.

## COVID-19 vaccinations

People living with mental ill-health have 5 times higher rates of vaccine preventable deaths. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of vaccinations as a public health measure, and an opportunity to improve the physical health and life expectancy of people living with mental ill-health. Over 90% of consumer respondents have already had or are planning to have their COVID-19 vaccination. Over three-quarters were asked by their GP about their COVID-19 vaccination status.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All health professionals should regularly ask about health screening for cancer, heart disease, cancer, lung disease and vaccination status and be ready and equipped to support consumers to access the necessary screening or treatments.
2. Further training, resources and guidance for mental health professionals to focus on a consumer's holistic healthcare including attention to consumers' physical health.
3. Further training for health professionals regarding involving consumers and carers in decision-making about medications and responding to concerns about their physical and mental health care.
4. All health professionals should routinely ask consumers about smoking, and be prepared to provide advice and assistance should the consumer be interested in quitting.
5. Health information about chronic health conditions must be shared between GPs and others who are involved in the care of the consumer with consent from the consumer.
6. Greater engagement with and involvement of carers is support to a 'whole of health' approach to mental health care.
7. Establishing a central online repository providing trusted resources specifically aimed at supporting physical health of mental health consumers, carers and service providers. This should be co-designed with consumers, carers and service providers.