

The timing of this research report could not be better. With the naming of Professor Patrick McGorry as 2010 Australian of the Year, mental illness has moved up several notches on the agenda of social issues demanding urgent attention.

Wesley Mission welcomes this development. We deal day after day with people suffering everything from anxiety and depression to schizophrenia, and know first hand the damage these conditions cause for sufferers, their families and the wider community.

We have long advocated the need for early intervention and treatment for mental illness, and the necessity of providing a range of treatment options for sufferers.

The findings in *Keeping minds well: Mental illness is everybody's business* support this approach as well as highlighting the need for everyone to play a role in addressing this problem.

Mental illness in NSW is an enormous issue, and not just in terms of the numbers of people affected.

Social stigma continues to have a negative impact on diagnosis and treatment, while the chosen treatment options are often far from ideal.

We are fortunate that 2010 Australian of the Year Professor Patrick McGorry is such a vocal proponent of the need to reassess the way we approach mental illness in this country.

Already this year he has made several public calls to overhaul Australia's mental health system. In common with mental health expert Professor Ian Hickie, who is interviewed in this report, he is calling for a re-direction of funds away from acute hospital services to more community-based care, such as that offered by Wesley Mission.

McGorry wants a modern, unified system with early intervention at its core and a major focus on children and young people up to 25, as well as other key points in the life span.

McGorry and Hickie like to point to the fact that when people present to the medical system with warning signs of a serious physical illness, the doors swing open to fast-track care. With mental illness, they often slam shut. This report bears out many of their comments and contains many other pertinent insights, including positive steps that can be taken around early diagnosis and treatment.

It is Wesley Mission's wish that the findings provide a trigger for further debate as well as increasing our understanding of mental illness and the best ways to prevent, or reduce, the suffering it causes so many people.

Key findings

- **Mental illness has a huge social impact**

More than half the people of NSW (53 per cent) will personally experience a mental health problem at some point in their lives. This represents 2.8 million individuals. Additionally, during their lives more than 77 per cent will either personally experience a mental health problem, or know someone who has. This represents 4.1 million people.

- **Social stigma still surrounds mental illness**

A great deal of fear and misinformation still persists around mental health issues. People are typically more accepting of someone with a serious physical illness than someone with a mental health problem.

- **Delaying treatment stacks the odds against sufferers**

Compared to those with a serious physical illness, people suffering from a mental illness are much more reluctant to seek treatment. This affects both the severity of their illness and their chances of recovery.

- **Family and friends are the first port of call for help**

People suffering mental illness identified family and friends as the first "port of call" in talking about their situation and seeking help. This raises the question of how to best equip these groups to better deal with the issues.

- **Strong link to known risk factors and protective measures**

There is a strong correlation between risk factors for mental illness, identified in other research, and the likelihood of experiencing a mental illness. These factors are financial stress, work pressures, sleeping problems, traumatic events and strong feelings of loneliness. Similarly, a range of previously-identified protective measures were shown to have a positive impact on prevention and management of mental illness.

- **There is strong community support for prevention programs**

A strong backing for prevention measures in the community is evident, particularly respite for carers and school-based programs.