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MEDIA RELEASE

We need more mental health beds, but not in hospitals!

More acute mental health beds and more doctors is not the answer to Australia's mental health needs – it is more community-based beds which will improve mental health outcomes, according to David Crosbie, CEO of the Mental Health Council of Australia.

Speaking in response to the AMA Federal Budget Submission, Mr Crosbie said he appreciated the fact that the AMA, along with many other experts and policy makers, acknowledged mental health should become a priority in 2010-2011. However the real investment needed is not into hospitals and acute care, but into the community where people most need assistance.

“We have a desperate shortage of community-based residential treatment options for people with a mental illness. This shortage places huge pressures on hospitals, prisons and carers who courageously try to look after people who really need community-based residential care,” Mr Crosbie said.

“If there are more community-based mental health treatment beds, the health system, the hospital system, the prison system, the homelessness system and the alcohol and other drug treatment system would all save money and operate more effectively. Just as importantly, people with a mental illness and their carers would receive better treatment and support. The flow on benefits of better mental health treatment is also significant in terms of employment, productivity and family well-being.”

The facts are that:

- From the 1960s to the 1990s, Australia lost over two thirds of its mental health beds. These 20,000 beds have not been replaced.
- Since the mid 1990s the number of acute beds has stayed relatively stable per head of population although these beds are now more likely to be in hospitals and not in stand-alone specialist mental health facilities.
- Over 40% of people currently in acute mental health beds would not be there if community-based treatment options were available.
- Offenders with a mental illness stay longer in prison because there are limited community-based programs offenders with a mental illness can be paroled to.
- Since the mid 1990s, there has been a very significant reduction in non-acute (community-based) beds, with around half of these 4,400 beds disappearing.
- While Victoria and the ACT have maintained a relatively high number of community-based beds, states like NSW, WA, QLD and SA have a very long way to go to match Victoria and provide equivalent numbers of 24 hour staffed and partially staffed community based mental health treatment beds.

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