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Mental Health Council warns against narrow approach to mental health

The Mental Health Council of Tasmania (MHCT) has raised concerns about both major parties' plans to address rising mental health issues in Australia ahead of the Federal election. MHCT CEO, Connie Digolis, called on both parties to step up and prioritise a proactive, preventive approach to mental health that would help Australians be and stay well, instead of letting them become increasingly unwell before providing support.

She said that the announcements were welcome acknowledgements from both major parties that mental health is in desperate need of investment in Australia but cautioned that the mental health system shouldn't be solely focussed on treatment.

"These pledges from both parties are well intended but somewhat misguided. They're a reaction, not a solution, to the rising rates of mental health concerns we're seeing, especially among our young people. We need to be looking at why this is happening and exploring solutions that can stop it getting to this point in the first place."

Ms Digolis continued, "All Australians deserve the opportunity to be and stay well. That happens through prevention, and earlier intervention. We shouldn't have to wait until we become unnecessarily unwell before we can access support. It's like the old saying 'an apple a day keeps the doctor away'. Our government should be taking a proactive approach and giving us more apples. Instead, all we're being promised is more doctors."

Despite the concerns, Ms Digolis welcomed the Labor party's \$90 million pledge to fund 1200 training placements, including mental health professionals and peer workers, but said more details were needed on what roles would be included within their definition of 'mental health professionals'.

"Workforce investment is vital. Current shortages are a significant bottleneck, and one of the biggest reasons why people are struggling to access timely support."

She warned that workforce funding should be spread across a range of roles within the sector to ensure people could access support at all levels of need.

"Psychologists and psychiatrists will always be vital parts of our mental health system - we need to ensure people can access them when they need to. But they should be one of the last resorts, not the only option. We must ensure we're bolstering the workforce across the entire mental health sector not just at the pointy end – counsellors, mental health nurses, community mental health workers, occupational therapists to name a few."

She reminded an incoming government that they have a duty of care to help all Australians be and stay well, "We must empower everyone with the skills and knowledge they need so they can take a proactive approach to their mental health and wellbeing. And when they do notice a dip in their mental health, we must ensure there are easily accessible supports available at all levels in the community so they can take action before reaching a point where more complex and costly responses are the only option."

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