



Rural Health Connect
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Committee Secretary
Mental Health Select Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

04/02/2022

Dear Mental Health Select Committee,

I am writing to introduce our service and discuss our experiences and observations as an online psychology platform and social enterprise. Also, to put forward some ideas on how we could play a greater role in supporting the mental health of rural Queenslanders.

Rural Health Connect is an online platform that links people in rural areas to psychologists over video calls and phone calls. We are social enterprise based in Rockhampton and covering all of rural Australia. Nearly all sessions done through our platform are bulk billed. Most of the psychologists work in private practice elsewhere and dedicate some hours each week to our service to help people in need. We have just over 90 psychologists registered (and growing) on the platform and conduct hundreds of sessions a week. We have developed all of our own software, largely thanks to support from the QLD and Victorian Governments.

We have always passionately believed in the benefits of telehealth, particularly in rural areas where accessing a psychologist has often been difficult if not impossible. Research shows the outcomes from telehealth psychology sessions are comparable to face-to-face. It means that clients are able to do their sessions from the privacy and convenience of home, without the often-long drive into town. For people who are working or have young children, this allows them to access help without disrupting their day. It also allows for privacy often not possible in a small town where everyone knows your car. It also means people can speak to a psychologist with the right interest areas for them. We have psychologists with interest areas including LGBTIQ, Aboriginal, eating disorders, aging, cancer diagnosis and many



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more. As research has shown that the therapeutic rapport built with the psychologist, ie: speaking to the *right* psychologist, is as important as any other factor in the success of therapy, our large database of psychologists and targeted questions can provide new benefits.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the psychologists who work on the platform, who do sessions for the bulk billed rate of \$88 per session instead of the industry approved rate of \$260 a session, to help those who need it.

Observations

Since the beginning of COVID- 19 we have seen acceptance of telehealth as a method of service delivery grow. Clients and psychologists have embraced it and so have GPs and other referrers. We therefore believe that our service, and telehealth generally, are well placed to play a bigger role in helping to address the current huge demand for mental health services in QLD.

At the moment, demand is far exceeding supply for psychologists throughout Australia, with 47 per cent having closed their books nationally, according to the Australian Association of Psychologists inc in December 2021. That is making it even harder to find psychologists who will bulk bill - so those who are disadvantaged are missing out.

We recognise the huge needs around mental health in Queensland at the moment. We were founded to help those who are disadvantaged, as well as those who are in rural areas. We are extremely grateful to the QLD government for supporting us via grants for social enterprises and would very much like to be part of new efforts to provide better access to those in need. Our software is scaleable and available for use in any way that it could be of benefit. We are proposing support in two possible ways:

Proposals

1. We have come up to a new and innovative solution to the issue of demand exceeding supply for psychologists. We are working with a number of universities including University of QLD and Central QLD University, to have 5th and 6th year provisional psychologists, who are doing their placements, available to see people with less complex conditions. This takes the pressure off registered psychologists, however there is an easy step-up for those clients who need, to either registered



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psychologists on the platform or in the community. The issue is that these sessions can not be paid for through Medicare - and although far cheaper than a registered psychologist there are still some costs for the universities as well as administration for us, as well as supervision. We could put together a pilot to make these services available across rural QLD where they are desperately needed.

2. Support from Rural Health Connect's large database of existing registered psychologists, with a focus on scaling our operations to meet need. As our software and our processes are already established it is easy for us to grow and adapt our operations to help meet areas of need.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read my submission.

Kind regards,

Megan Gomez

Director,
Rural Health Connect