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## **Australian Mental Health Prize 2020: Hidden threat from COVID-19 is long-term mental health issues**

Australia's mental health system will need to be prepared to deal with long-term mental health issues resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

This was the message from Professor Richard Bryant AC, UNSW Sydney Scientia Professor, delivered when he launched this year's Australian Mental Health Prize today via an online forum.

The prize, now in its fifth year, recognises Australians who have made outstanding contributions to the promotion of mental health or the prevention and treatment of mental illness.

"The COVID-19 pandemic is causing unprecedented pressures on people around the world. Apart from the anxieties of infection, people are experiencing considerable stress arising from changes to work structure, unemployment, financial pressures, schooling, concern for family and the elderly, and social isolation," Professor Bryant said.

"Prior pandemics such as SARS have shown that mental health issues spike during the outbreak, and more worryingly, can lead to longer-term problems well beyond the pandemic itself," Professor Bryant explained.

"We need to remember that the hidden threat from COVID-19 is the long-term mental health effects resulting from economic downturns, with many people losing jobs, reduced income, and suffering poor financial security.

"These pandemics also highlight there are some groups who are especially vulnerable to mental health problems during and after a pandemic, including health workers, those in quarantine, and those infected."

Professor Bryant said that many strategies can be employed to manage mental health in the context of COVID-19.

"It is important to note that many of the stress reactions many of us experience during the pandemic are not necessarily a mental disorder but rather reflect understandable stress reactions to a severe situation. In this sense, many of the strategies that can be used at this time are those used to help people cope with ongoing stressors rather than mental disorders."

Professor Bryant pointed out that the spike in mental health issues arising from the COVID-19 crisis will also require new strategies and treatment formats.

“Health systems are being developed and implemented around the world to try to provide mental health services to hugely increased numbers of people. These services need to adopt innovative treatment formats to accommodate social distancing, potentially large numbers of people requiring help, and targeting people who traditionally do not seek mental health assistance.”

Scientia Professor Henry Brodaty from UNSW Medicine agrees with Professor Bryant’s comments and believes it is more important than ever to publicly acknowledge and address the unprecedented levels of mental health issues that will arise from the COVID-19 crisis.

“The mental health sector will need to adapt to the changing environment we are all currently living through. It is imperative that we acknowledge and celebrate the dedication and work of the mental health sector in assisting Australians through these difficult times,” Professor Brodaty said.

“Mental illness is something that affects our whole community, and the Australian Mental Health Prize is a valuable way to highlight progress being made in this space.”

Professor Brodaty said it was important for those working in the mental health sector to recognise the progress our colleagues are making in research and improving patient outcomes.

Chair of the Australian Mental Health Prize Advisory Group, Ita Buttrose, said the prize is helping to improve mental health care in Australia and ensures mental health stays top of mind for Australians.

“I have no doubt that the Australian mental health system will rise to the challenge and support Australians through the COVID-19 crisis,” Ms Buttrose said.

“I look forward to discovering who the winner of this year’s prize is and learning more about some of the world-class work being done in the field of mental health.”

UNSW Medicine places high importance on mental health research and works with many other mental health institutions and individuals in this area.

“We must recognise and acknowledge those individuals who are making headway in the area of mental health,” concluded Professor Bryant.

“We encourage clinicians, health professionals, community groups and individuals to nominate people whom they feel are making a real difference in the area of mental health research, advocacy or service delivery for the 2020 Australian Mental Health Prize.”

*Ends*

## Media contacts

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## How to nominate

To enter, nominees must provide a CV and 200 words outlining the work being undertaken and how it is making an impact. Nomination forms can be obtained from: <http://australianmentalhealthprize.org.au>

Entries close on 30 August 2020.

Social media

@UNSWMedicine

#AMHP

## Background – Australian Mental Health Prize

The Australian Mental Health Prize was established in 2016 by UNSW through its School of Psychiatry, Australia's pre-eminent psychiatric research department. It recognises Australians who have made outstanding contributions to either the promotion of mental health, or the prevention/treatment of mental illness.

### Why establish the Australian Mental Health Prize?

Australia has led the way internationally in many aspects of mental health such as community awareness, public advocacy and innovative services. This includes innovative programs such as *beyondblue*, the national depression initiative, and *headspace*, the national network of youth mental health services. Our open public discourse involving politicians and high-profile individuals occurs in few other countries.

The Australian Mental Health Prize:

- Acknowledges and recognises the important and ground-breaking work that many Australians are doing for mental health
- Raises public awareness on the importance of mental health, and
- Provides an incentive to improve services and outcomes for people with mental illness.

### What are the criteria for the Australian Mental Health Prize?

The Prize is awarded annually to an Australian who has made ***outstanding contributions to either the promotion of mental health, or the prevention/treatment of mental illness – in areas such as advocacy, research or service provision.*** (Nominations of individuals who were previously nominated, but were not finalists, are welcomed.)

## **Who is involved with the Prize?**

The Prize has been established by a group of eminent Australians in partnership with UNSW. Chaired by Ita Buttrose AC OBE, the Prize Advisory Group comprises: Jack Heath, Professor Patrick McGorry AO, Jessica Rowe AM, Sophie Scott, Greta Bradman, UNSW Scientia Professor Henry Brodaty AO, UNSW Scientia Professor Philip Mitchell AM, UNSW Professor Valsamma Eapen and UNSW Scientia Professor Perminder Sachdev AM.

## **Timeline:**

29 April: 11.00am Launch of the Prize and call for nominations (<http://australianmentalhealthprize.org.au>)

30 August: Applications close