

More people becoming aware of mental health — and responding

By Zoe Thomas

UNDOUBTEDLY, out-back communities are some of the strongest in Australian society — the resilience, strength and courage in the face of drought and environmental disasters are equally as commendable as they are jaw-dropping.

Therefore, it is of no surprise that these added pressures and stressors will impact and have an effect upon the mental health of the individual — so much so, that the Central West has experienced a surge in the number of residents seeking mental health support services.

Resultant to these comments, this evidence became the basis of a mental health roundtable discussion held in Longreach last week. The Central West Mental Health Roundtable was the second of its kind following the inaugural event last year.

The Roundtable was jointly organised by the Western Queensland Primary Health Network (WQPHN) and the Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD), which encompasses seven shires in the Central West and co-ordinates financial counselling in the region.

Held at the Birdcage Hotel on Wednesday, August 28, the WQPHN in collaboration with other organisations came together to discuss mental health services in the region, with the revelation that service providers



Vaughan Johnson spoke at the event.

have observed service rates more than doubling in the past year.

WQPHN CEO, Stuart Gordon, said that recent environmental disasters have understandably had an impact on the mental well-being of local residents.

“Unfortunately, with the effects of the drought and recent flooding events still being firmly felt, we would expect to see an increase in the number of people seeking help to manage the added pressure and strain being experienced that in turn impacts on mental well-being,” Mr Gordon explained.

“What we can also confidently say is that there is now a greater awareness of the new services that have been introduced to the region, and that access to care has improved dramatically since we began our work in this space just a few years ago.”

According to WQPHN health intelligence data,

there has been an 82 per cent increase in the number of clients accessing PHN-funded mental health support services in the last year. Within the 2018-19 period, this equates to a rise of more than 700 individuals.

Moreover, Mr Gordon said local General Practitioners have also played a significant role in treating mental health patients, with a 40 per cent increase in the uptake of Mental Health Treatment Plans — a process where care is planned and managed.

“It does suggest people are now more aware, and that local general practices are responding well to this increased demand, are better equipped with knowledge and better connected to the right services to provide the right care at the right time for those experiencing mental health issues,” Mr Gordon said.

“These are important indications that people

are accessing care and it hasn’t happened by accident.”

Various agencies and stakeholders took part in the roundtable discussion — including Local Government Authorities, Rural Financial Counselling Services, WQPHN-commissioned Service Providers and State Government Mental Health Services.

Now in its second year, Mr Gordon said that the discussions have allowed the opportunity to reflect on the new services introduced and those now available to anyone who may be struggling.

“There has been a combined approach, working as a team across agencies and ensuring new services on the ground are hard-wired to integrate and support one another, keeping each other informed and ensuring the community is aware of all options,” he highlighted.

“What’s also been critical is the leadership and strong advocacy of our Councils, many of whom are leading the way in changing attitudes across providers and community.”

When asked about key takeaways from the discussion, Mr Gordon reaffirmed that there is still more to be done. There will be a continued focus of all the different organisations and independent bodies collaborating and working together.

“We have seen some significant increases in accessing care, with numerous services hitting the ground,” CEO Gordon said.

“There has been a focus on early intervention through avenues such as self-referrals.

“Long-term, we want to concentrate on recovery and delivering those skills to manage them. We will be focusing on patient outcomes and client’s ability to heal themselves.

“That’s why we see it as important to strengthen partnerships and ensure there is a range of well-connected service options available to communities, including non-clinical low intensity services that help to keep conversations going, but have direct linkage to clinical supports if these are necessary.”

Mr Gordon further explained that Local Governments want to see evidence that these services are making a difference within communities, and they will be a large focus for the next year.

“We will come together and regroup again in 12 months — we have the perfect building blocks for innovation” he said.

The Central West Mental Health Roundtable will meet again in 2020 to address and reassess the mental health needs of the Central West communities.



Cystic Fibrosis sufferer Sienna Machin with Rosemary Champion, convenor of the Mini Marathon for the past 30 years.

Marathon event for Cystic Fibrosis reaches 30 years

By Zoe Thomas

SUPER-KEEN walkers, runners and cyclists rose with the sun on Fathers Day (September 1) to participate in the annual Meagan Walker Mini Marathon that raises awareness and provides support to those individuals suffering from the life-shortening genetic condition, cystic fibrosis.

A highlight this year was the promotion of organ donation and its role in the future of those suffering from cystic fibrosis.

The destination was Longway Station, 11km from Longreach. This year marked the thirtieth anniversary of the event and organiser and station owner, Rosemary Champion, said that the event had been a huge success, and she was pleased with the community participation and support from across

the Central West.

“We had a team from Aramac travel here to participate,” Rosemary said, noting that at least 45 residents from the tiny town, including many small children, once again making the journey.

“They wore special green team shirts emblazoned with the Cystic Fibrosis red rose,” she added.

“It was also heart-warming to see Jack Chandler walk the route with his grandmother, Sue Walker — Meagan’s Mother.”

However, it wasn’t just solely about the runners on the day, with local volunteer firefighters from the Longreach Station also involved in the morning.

Rosemary said that the local Longreach Firies have supported the Meagan Walker Mini Marathon for over 30 years.

“Almost every year, the 1930 Dennis antique fire engine has travelled the 22km round trip every Father’s Day for those 30 years,” she said.

“Last Sunday, we had a volunteer firefighter driving the Dennis.”

Overall, the event attracted 130 registrations and raised over \$5,000, with all funds going towards Cystic Fibrosis Queensland.

“We hope the funds raised can continue to offer the vital support services to families, with the ultimate goal of finding a cure one day very soon,” Rosemary said.

After a hugely successful 2019 Mini Marathon, participants can look forward to lacing-up their shoes again next year for a worthwhile cause.

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