

KEY FINDINGS

Mental healthcare pathways for urban Aboriginal children

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Policy context

Social and emotional wellbeing problems are the chief health issue experienced by young Australians. The small amount of information available suggests that Aboriginal young people experience even higher levels of mental health related harm non-Aboriginal young people in Australia.

Little is known about the pathways that Aboriginal children and adolescents with mental health concerns take when accessing specialised care and to what extent services are available, accessible and culturally appropriate. Further, although GPs are generally considered the gatekeepers to accessing specialist mental health services, it is unclear the extent to which they feel confident and equipped to detect, assess and refer children for suspected mental health concerns, particularly Aboriginal children.

This compilation of research sought to understand whether current guidelines and treatment pathways meet the needs of Aboriginal young people presenting with Social and Emotional Well-Being (SEWB)-related concerns and the extent to which GPs, nurses and Aboriginal Health Workers feel confident and equipped to deal with the mental health concerns they see in the children presenting to Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs). To gain this understanding, two systematic reviews and a qualitative study were conducted.

Key messages

- > There is a lack of pathways and guidelines to direct mental health care for Aboriginal children and this presents a significant barrier to effective and efficient mental health service delivery
- > GPs are the primary gatekeepers for specialist service provision, but GPs may lack confidence in detecting and treating mental health concerns in Aboriginal children, particularly for less severe concerns
- > Amongst practitioners, there was a desire for more training, access to screening tools and for guidelines to inform and direct care for Aboriginal children with suspected mental health concerns
- > Practitioners noted the key role of Aboriginal Health Workers in providing cultural security, support and transport to facilitate successful care for children with mental health concerns
- > Due to their strong link with the Aboriginal Community being based on trust and ongoing relationships, the ACCHSs have a unique capacity to provide a 'whole-of-family focus' to mental health care that supports both the child and parents, and that can be flexible and proactive to recognise children that are in need of care
- > There is a need for consistent, coordinated care and for culturally appropriate specialists to be accessible to Aboriginal families. In areas where specialists are not available to refer to, substantial stress is placed on the front-line health providers.