



Advocates for Survivors of Child Abuse
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Dear Minister Meagher,

ASCA notes that a key outcome of the Australian Health Ministers' Conference is a commitment to consultation prior to a meeting in August to develop the Fourth National Mental Health Plan.

ASCA is the only community organisation in Australia that provides care and support to adult survivors of all forms of child abuse. Prior to your meeting in August, we would like to speak with you, or a representative of your office, to discuss our concerns about mental health service provision in relation to the psychological impacts of childhood trauma.

Research in Australia and overseas has demonstrated that exposure to childhood abuse is associated with significantly worse health outcomes later in life. The adult mental health consequences of childhood abuse include depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, sexual disorders, suicidal behavior, and substance abuse. The severity of these disorders is frequently compounded by the unusually high rates of physical illness experienced by adult survivors of child abuse.

Despite conclusive evidence that child abuse sits at the heart of the public mental health burden, there is limited capacity in the mental health system to treat adult survivors. Few mental health professionals have been trained to identify adult survivors of child abuse and work with them effectively, and there are few specialist services providers for adult survivors of child abuse. As a result of these systemic deficits, many adult survivors of child abuse report a history of ineffective and revictimising treatment in the Australian health system.

We believe that the National Mental Health Plan would benefit greatly by adopting an evidence-based approach to the treatment and care of adult survivors of child abuse. The lack of capacity within the health system to identify and treat adult survivors of child abuse comes at considerable economic cost. Adult survivors of child abuse present with "complex needs" frequently, and repeatedly, to services that cannot address their core mental health issues.

Initiatives that build the capacity of mental health professionals to identify, and treat, adult survivors of child abuse would reduce the number of these inappropriate presentations, whilst ameliorating the chronic disability that frequently prevents adult survivors of child abuse from engaging with their community in a fulfilling and meaningful way.

There are a range of initiatives that would increase the effectiveness of mental health service provision to adult survivors of child abuse, and to the Australian community as a whole:

- Integrating information on the psychological impacts of abuse and trauma into core mental health training and curriculum;
- Undertaking routine screening for childhood abuse amongst children and adults presenting to health care services, and providing workers with training and resources to enable them to refer abused clients appropriately;
- Expanding specialist services for adult survivors of child abuse, of which there are very few;
- Funding community-based educational programs for adult survivors of child abuse, since these have been shown to improve their capacity for self-care and self-management, and reduce loneliness and distress.

We would value the opportunity to discuss these issues with you further. Please contact me on 0420 377 742 or at msalter@asca.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Salter
Director
Advocates for Survivors of Child Abuse