



Monday 30 November 2020

New standards open the door to safe and effective digital mental health care

The introduction of world-leading standards for digital mental health services in Australia is set to be a game-changer for the nation at a time when the delivery of high-quality mental health care has never been more important.

The announcement today of new [National Safety and Quality Digital Mental Health \(NSQDMH\) Standards](#) by the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (the Commission) has been embraced by the mental health sector and consumer and carer advocates.

The NSQDMH Standards will support the delivery of high quality and safe care including counselling, treatment and peer-to-peer support services via telephone, videoconferencing, websites, SMS, webchat and mobile apps. They encompass mental health, suicide prevention and alcohol and other drug services.

With one in five adultsⁱ and one in seven adolescentsⁱⁱ experiencing a common mental health disorder each year in Australia – combined with unprecedented demand for digital delivery of mental health services this year – there are tangible benefits in being able to access safe and effective care on digital platforms.

The coronavirus outbreak has amplified the scale of mental health issues and research has shown it has adversely impacted Australia's mental wellbeing. Three quarters (78%) of Australians reported in April this year that their mental health had been impactedⁱⁱⁱ and more than one million Australians had sought help from mental health services^{iv}.

Dr Peggy Brown AO, the Commission's Senior Clinical Advisor who led the development of the NSQDMH Standards, said they were recognised as an important leap forward by service providers, clinicians and end users.

"It is more important than ever for Australians to have ready access to high-quality digital mental health services," she said. "The standards will engender more trust and confidence among consumers, carers and clinicians in Australia's digital mental health services. Service providers will also benefit from having a quality framework to improve their delivery of digital mental health care.

"The Commission has consulted widely on the digital mental health standards to consider all perspectives. Given the rapid transition to digital services as part of the pandemic response, there is a compelling case to ensure the standards are swiftly adopted by service providers, which will benefit so many Australians," said Dr Brown.

Within the framework, there are three core NSQDMH Standards: 1) clinical and technical governance; 2) partnering with consumers; and 3) the model of care, which includes communicating for safety and recognising and responding to acute deterioration. Not all recommended actions within each standard will apply to every service provider.

The Commission has worked closely with consumers, carers, health professionals, digital mental health service providers, academics, experts, and government and peak body representatives to shape the NSQDMH Standards. The draft standards received a strong response when they were put out for national public consultation from February to May this year.

“The new standards are voluntary but much feted by the sector, which has been seeking a quality assurance framework for several years,” said Dr Brown.

“Australia is recognised as having one of the safest healthcare systems in the world. As with any health service, digital mental health services should have proven and effective safety and quality systems in place to minimise the risk of harm to patients, and these standards are the first step towards achieving that goal.”

Professor Nick Titov, Executive Director, MindSpot, and Chair of the Commission’s Digital Mental Health Advisory Group, anticipates that the standards will help “ensure a high bar” for mental health services using digital platforms.

“By conducting a self-assessment based on the digital mental health standards, providers will quickly identify areas where improvement is required, resulting in improved safety and quality of care,” said Professor Titov.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has increased demand for digital mental health services. Digital platforms allow us to be nimble and innovative in delivering services, but we need to work together to ensure that people are protected from harm, particularly when they are vulnerable and coping with mental health issues. We welcome these standards, which provide a clear safety and quality framework.”

Ms Eileen McDonald, NSW Carer Representative, National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum, and Deputy Chair of Digital Mental Health Advisory Group, said the NSQDMH Standards provide a nationally consistent statement of the level of safety and quality that consumers and carers can expect from digital health service providers.

“Today’s announcement by the Commission is an exciting step in the right direction. The digital mental health standards will incentivise services to provide safe and high-quality care, and will empower people to make informed choices about the digital resources they use” said Ms McDonald.

The NSQDMH Standards will be launched today via a live-streamed event. This will feature a panel discussion with Dr Peggy Brown, Professor Nick Titov, Eileen McDonald and youth mental health advocate Samuel Hockey. ABC National Medical Reporter Sophie Scott will host the online event.

Tune in at 12:30pm AEDT today, Monday 30 November. To register for the webcast and find out more information about the NSQDMH Standards, visit: <https://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/dmhs>

ENDS

Media enquiries

Angela Jackson, Communications and Media Manager, (02) 9126 3513 or 0407 213 522
angela.jackson@safetyandquality.gov.au

Leanne Findlay, Director, Communications, (02) 9126 3509 or 0468 740 540
leanne.findlay@safetyandquality.gov.au

About the Commission

The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care is an Australian Government agency that leads and coordinates national improvements in the safety and quality of health care based on the best available evidence. By working in partnership with patients, carers, clinicians, the Australian, state and territory health systems, the private sector, managers and healthcare organisations, the Commission aims to ensure that the health system is better informed, supported and organised to deliver safe and high-quality care. www.safetyandquality.gov.au

ⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics. *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*. Australian Department of Health. 2007.

ⁱⁱ Lawrence D, Johnson S, Hafekost J, Boterhoven De Haan K, Sawyer M, Ainley J, Zubrick SR. *The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents: Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*. Department of Health, Canberra. 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Newby JM, O'Moore K, Tang S, Christensen H, Faasse K. *Acute mental health responses during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia*. *PLOS ONE* 15(7). 2020.

^{iv} The Australian, *Mental health crisis: one million 'lost' in coronavirus lockdown*, 14 October 2020.