The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) is a membership organisation that prepares doctors to be medical specialists in the field of psychiatry; supports and enhances clinical practice; advocates for people affected by mental illness and advises government on mental healthcare. As such, we have a major role in delivering training and education, providing clinical, policy and systems advice, and liaising with other medical professions in relation to mental healthcare.

With more than 5,000 members, including around 3,700 fully qualified Fellows and 1,200 members who are training to qualify as psychiatrists, the RANZCP represents psychiatrists who lead the provision of mental healthcare and use a range of evidence-based treatments to support a person in their journey to recovery, including pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy.

The RANZCP welcomes the release of the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care’s (ACSQHC) Australian Atlas of Healthcare Variation (the Atlas) and the insight this significant body of work offers.

We have reviewed the mental health chapter of the Atlas with great interest, and we note the significant geographical variations in the dispensing of psychotropic medications in some categories, including the dispensing of anxiolytic medications to adults and older people, and the dispensing of antipsychotic and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) medication to children and adolescents. In future iterations of the project we would be interested to see the details sitting behind this data drawn out, including disaggregation of prescribing patterns, as well as how dispensation figures relate to patient numbers.

Many of the variations identified in the Atlas repeat findings that the healthcare sector has been working to address, however the Atlas makes it clear that much more work needs to be done to reduce or explain these variations. In coming months the RANZCP will closely review the findings of the Atlas and its implications for psychiatric practice.

As part of this, the RANZCP will request our education and professional practice committees, made up of psychiatrists with extensive expertise, as well as consumers and carers, trainee representatives and other stakeholders, to review the Atlas’ findings to inform their recommendations for training, policy and professional practice.

We also anticipate the Atlas being a strategic resource for our work in advocacy, workforce development, mental health research and engagement with the Choosing Wisely initiative and the Mental Health Professionals’ Network.

In addition the RANZCP looks forward to continuing to work with our Fellowship, the ACSQHC, other medical colleges and the broader sector in identifying how the findings can be used to inform a coordinated, clinically-engaged and constructive response.

We keenly anticipate the Commonwealth Government’s release of its response to the National Mental Health Commission’s Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services Report and Fifth National Mental Health Plan, as these will be important factors in addressing issues to do with healthcare variation. RANZCP makes frequent contributions to government and independent reviews with the aim of ensuring policy and program developments are informed by clinical expertise and best practice. These are all publically available on the RANZCP website.

Overall, the RANZCP welcomes the launch of the Atlas as an initial first step in exploring these very important issues, with the ultimate goal of ensuring that all Australians have access to high quality healthcare. The RANZCP will continue to work towards this goal, ensuring that treatments for mental health issues are evidence based, clinically informed and arrived at via genuine and effective communication with consumers and carers.

For more information about psychiatrists and psychiatric practice please refer to the resources listed below or visit www.ranzcp.org

RANZCP guidelines and resources for professional practice

- Clinical Practice Guidelines for Mood Disorders
- Position Statement 55 ‘Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in childhood and adolescence’ (2014)
- Professional Practice Guideline 10 ‘Antipsychotic medications as a treatment of behavioural and psychological symptoms in dementia’ (2009)

RANZCP resources on the mental healthcare environment

- Position Statement 80 ‘The role of psychiatrists in Australia and New Zealand’ (2013)
- Professional Practice Guideline ‘Best practice referral, communication and shared care arrangements between psychiatrists, general practitioners and psychologists’ (2014)
- Psychiatry services for older people: A report on current issues and evidence to inform the development of services and the revision of RANZCP Position Statement 22 (2015)
- Position Statement 22 ‘Psychiatry services for older people’ (2015)
- Position Statement 71 ‘Priority must be given to investment that improves the mental health of older Australians’ (2011)
- Position Statement 65 ‘Rural psychiatry’ (2015)