

TOP PSYCHIATRISTS IN PLEA TO PREMIER OVER MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

# 'Stopgap more harm than good'

EXCLUSIVE

NATASHA ROBINSON  
HEALTH EDITOR

The NSW government's stopgap strategy of relying on locums and visiting medical officers to care for the most severely mentally ill "will almost certainly do more harm than good" and is out of step with world's best practice, the nation's most prominent psychiatrists say as they launch a bid for funds to be quarantined to rebuild crumbling mental health systems.

Psychiatrists Dr McGorry, Ian Hickie, Gordon Parker and Alan Rosen have penned an open letter

to NSW Premier Chris Minns warning "the mental health system in NSW is deeply entrenched in a severe and enduring crisis", and that the situation is now "more precarious than it has ever been" amid mass resignations of specialists in the state.

"They warn the crisis in NSW is not primarily about pay or an industrial dispute, but more about systemic problems that have demoralised psychiatrists nationwide over the past decade, described recently by Federal Health Minister Mark Butler as "a stain on the nation".

The senior psychiatrists state that while mental health systems nationwide are in a dire state,

NSW is "near the bottom of the pack".

"Key indicators include the per capita ratio of mental health workers per population, inpatient suicide rates, inequality of access to specialist care, investment in non-government support and housing services, bed closures, and ineffective integration of clinical and psychosocial services," they write.

"Right now we call on you to hear the voices of those who are often least heard, including some of the most vulnerable individuals and families in our community."

The four doctors have sought an urgent meeting with Mr Minns as psychiatrist resignations continue to cripple NSW hospitals.

Up to 100 have already resigned and scores more will leave within weeks after their attempts to fix a recruitment and retention crisis in public hospitals reached stalemate.

The state is scrambling to employ locums to plug the gaps and is increasingly relying on visiting medical officers. This undermines continuity of care for the most complex patients, the psychiatrists say, and it will be a catastrophe for the future workforce if it is no longer majority-staffed by permanent staff specialists.

"NSW is failing many of the most vulnerable people with complex psychiatric disorders in need of public mental health services,"

the letter says. "For those people to be best served the NSW public sector services need to recruit many more high-quality medical graduates and then retain their services throughout their professional training period, and then on an ongoing basis in various roles in the public sector.

"In practice, continuity of care – which is exceptionally important for the most complex patients – is severely compromised by a model that relies on interchangeable visiting medical officers. Similarly, replacement of psychiatrists by nurses and/or psychologists will not address these complex needs.

"Tragedies like the Bondi Junction stabbings in April last year reflect the need to provide much more intensive continuity of mental healthcare and local supported housing for individuals who are most disconnected from traditional office-based services, and ongoing support for their families.

"Your government's immediate response was commendable, but the longer-term solutions need to be enacted urgently, and at scale, for the health and welfare of those directly impacted, alongside ensuring the safety, well-being, social cohesion and mental 'wealth' of the whole community.

"All of us have the experience to appreciate that this regrettable situation has been many years in the making – but we believe that

the situation now is more precarious than it has ever been.

"While your government has largely inherited this situation, it... has the power and means to address it through both immediate and longer-term structural changes. These changes could make profound differences to our patients, their loved ones, and the public sector clinicians who work tirelessly to support many of those who are most disadvantaged."

A spokesperson for Mr Minns confirmed the Premier had received the letter and "will respond in due course".

A five-day hearing has been scheduled in the IRC from March 17 to try to resolve the dispute.

## Proof the fairer sex is nicer as well

RHYS BLAKLEY

More than 150 years ago Charles Darwin wondered whether he'd spotted a distinction between the sexes.

"Women seems to differ from man in mental disposition, chiefly in her greater tenderness and less selfishness," he wrote in *The Descent of Man*.

One of the largest studies of its kind has now added weight to the great naturalist's hunch, with results suggesting that women are more generous than men.

More precisely, in an experiment that involved people having to decide whether to keep all of a small cash windfall or give some of it away to a stranger, women parted with 40 per cent more money than their parsimonious male peers.

The research involved more than 1000 adults who took part in what is known as "the dictator game". Often used in experiments by psychologists and economists, it involves two players but no real contest.

One player – the "dictator" – was given €10 (€16) and asked how much they would like to share with a second player, chosen at random from the pool of participants. The dictators did not know who they were paired with, nor whether the recipient was male or female. However, they were told that when it was their turn to be in the recipient role they would be placed with a different person, to lessen the chance of decisions influenced by reciprocity.

On average, women gave away €3.50, 40 per cent more than the men, who transferred €2.50 on average.

Moreover, while the most common decision for men was to not share anything with their partner, the choice made most frequently by women was to split the money 50-50.

Professor Marina Pavan of Jaume I University in Spain, a co-author of the research, said the results had taken her team by surprise. "What surprised us was the relatively big difference in giving between men and women," she said.

The size of the experiment helped, Professor Pavan explained. "Most existing studies showed small or no differences in generosity between genders, but did not have the number of observations we have," she said.

Professor Pavan and her colleagues also looked at the results of personality tests taken by the participants. They found two character traits that positively influenced generosity: openness (related to curiosity and tolerance to change) and agreeableness (related to empathy).

Other academics have suggested that women are more generous than men because society expects them to be, which means they suffer more negative consequences compared with men, if they are not.

But overall, Professor Pavan suggested that the experiments had shone a light on a positive side of human nature.

THE TIMES

## Trial results offer hope to prostate cancer sufferers

Researchers upbeat on treatment option for aggressive cases

PENNY TIMMS

SENIOR HEALTH REPORTER

Christian Edouard-Betsy was at work when his doctor called and asked him to meet immediately to discuss the results of a blood test for his prostate.

"When I got there he just said 'I don't like your result and I think you've got a real active and aggressive prostate cancer, and hearing that word 'cancer' – that just knocked me," the now 66-year-old father of four says.

Further testing confirmed those fears and Edouard-Betsy underwent somewhat successful surgery, but the cancer had spread to his lymph nodes requiring him to take hormone therapy to try to control it, which seemed to work for a while. At the time, he was under the care of a urologist and was trying to get an appointment with an oncologist, suggested to him by a friend.

Only later did he realise that, after putting his name on a waitlist for the oncologist, he had changed phone numbers, rendering him uncontactable. In the meantime, Edouard-Betsy says his prostate antigen levels rose rapidly and became "out of control". Then came another devastating blow.

"The urologist said to me, 'I'm sorry, there's nothing we can do, and I thought, what?'"

Edouard-Betsy contacted the oncologist again who said they had been trying to get in touch with him for the past year. Unlike his urologist, she offered alternative drugs, all of which ended in failure. Then she told him about a clinical trial that was about to begin and she thought he could make a good participant.

"I said, 'Well, I have no choice, have I? It's an aggressive cancer and I'm either going to go home. So she put my name down and I am one of the first patients who went through the trial."

The trial was specifically for patients with aggressive prostate cancer, known as castration-re-

sistant prostate cancer, for which there are few treatment options.

"A lot of men get prostate cancer that never kills them; they have treatment for it and they're fine," explains Professor Louise Emmett, study chair and director of therapeutics and nuclear medicine at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney.

But she says between 10 and 15 per cent of patients get metastatic prostate cancer, where the disease spreads beyond the prostate and it is those men who this trial was aimed at.

"A lot of those men, when they're first diagnosed, they go onto hormone treatment which controls it for a while but then it becomes what we call castrate-resistant. When something becomes castrate-resistant, they have about three years to live. And in the particular group of men that I was treating, they have about a 5 per cent five-year survival (rate)," she says.

**'It's a first step to finding something that really controls prostate cancer much better'**

PROFESSOR LOUISE EMMETT  
ST VINCENT'S HOSPITAL

Emmett led the research team for what they called the ENZA-p study. One group was given the hormone drug Enzalutamide at a dose of 160mg daily, while the combination group was given the same medication as well as an adaptive dose, given intravenously, of Lu-PSMA 617 every six to eight weeks.

The open-label, randomised, phase 2 trial was carried out across 15 hospitals in Australia between August 2020 and July 2022, though participants were then followed up for many months after. It involved 160 patients, 79 were randomly assigned the hormone, while 83 were given the combined therapy.

After a median follow up of 34 months, 96 deaths were recorded. However, of those who died, men in the combined group lived for a

median of 34 months, compared to the first group where the survival median was 26 months.

Patients in the combination therapy group also reported a higher quality of life because they were in less pain and were not as fatigued.

Emmett suggests the findings are exciting and suggests the therapy could even be used as a less toxic alternative to chemotherapy, though more studies are needed.

This work builds on previous studies of Lutetium-PSMA as a standalone therapy, with improvements to a patient's quality of life. However, only a modest improvement in overall survival was seen with a median four-month benefit observed, and only in one study.

"It looks like these two agents together are super powerful. They're more powerful together than they are on their own," she says.

"These are treatments that people get, that we usually give sequentially. So we do one, it fails, then we start the next. So what this does is it really raises the questions that we should be giving these treatments together, not only just in this space, but maybe even earlier. So we should be giving it to men who turn up with metastatic disease before they start failing treatments to try and stop the disease from getting hold and keeping it at low volume, and because it was so well tolerated."

The findings are published in the medical journal *The Lancet Oncology* and are being presented by Emmett at the annual American Society of Clinical Oncology Genitourinary Cancers Symposium in the US.

"I'm excited by it because, for me, it's a first step to finding something that really controls prostate cancer much better," she says.

Edouard-Betsy says his PSA levels went from "out of control" at the start of the trial to now being "undetectable".

"I'm over the moon," he beams while sitting next to Vicki, his wife of 40 years.

"I still had one or two rounds of go (on the trial) and the professor said to me 'we're pretty sure you don't need it, it seems to be working, and so I stopped early."



Prostate cancer sufferer Christian Edouard-Betsy with his wife Vicki at their home in Chatswood, Sydney

BRITTA CAMPION

## Flood damage will force up banana prices

ELODIE JAKES

Banana prices are expected to rise in coming weeks after widespread crop damage and ongoing road closures from the recent floods in north Queensland.

Floods have ravaged north Queensland, where 94 per cent of Australia's banana plantations and 80 per cent of the country's sugarcane fields are located.

Farmers have warned that banana prices will rise in a matter of days due to thousands of tonnes of product being damaged and essential transport routes remaining disrupted with several major roads and bridges still not usable.

Sugarcane crops have also been widely damaged, with the annual output expected to be cut by one million tonnes.

Australian Banana Growers' Council chair and grower Leon Collins said 40 per cent of banana plantations were underwater in his area of Tully, north of Townsville. "It was scary, we had between one and three metres of water across our paddocks," he said. "It means all that fruit is waterlogged or has soft marks and has to be thrown out."

Along with damaged crops, Mr Collins said flood damage to the



Grower Paul Lardi cuts back fallen banana plants in Tully

Bruce Highway, Queensland's main transport corridor, has led to bananas ready for market being stuck in trucks, unable to be transported around Australia.

"There's definitely going to be a gap in supply and we can expect that gap to hit by early next week," he said. "For buyers, that gap will last 10 days, up to two weeks.

We're looking at banana industry losses in the Tully area of \$20m a week, since the flooding began."

Sydney Market Reporting Services fruit surveyor Chris Cope said cartons of bananas from north

Queensland had been increasing by \$2 a day for the past week.

"A 15kg carton of bananas would usually cost \$20-\$40," he said. "But currently they're coming in at \$30-\$50 a carton, and that number could increase."

Mr Cope said that blocked Queensland roads, less product and back-to-school demand were all driving banana prices up.

"Traditionally bananas have sold for about \$2.50 a kilogram but we could see that get up to about \$4, depending on what the merchants want to do," he said.

Queensland Cane, Agriculture and Renewables, the industry advocacy group, estimates there are up to \$50m million in losses to the Herbert sugar cane region around Townsville.

QCAR Herbert district manager Lawrence Di Bella said there would be one million fewer tonnes in this year's cane harvest.

"Our crops are still small this early in the year, so with a lot of our plants underwater for more than seven days now the cane is actually starting to rot and die," he said.

"It's not going to take a year, it's going to take years to fix up our farms after this. We need better infrastructure and better roads."

In a joint statement on Thursday, Anthony Albanese announced disaster assistance grants of up to \$25,000 for north Queensland primary producers. But Cane growers chief executive Denis Galligan is concerned these payments don't go far enough.

"For many growers the damage is extensive, and it is likely these grants will not even scratch the surface," he said. "Many will need further support through additional assistance measures and an increase to the funding threshold, as seen last year in response to Cyclone Jasper."

## Miners, residents brace for cyclone to hit

RIA PANDEY  
ZOE DE KNOING  
BRAD THOMPSON

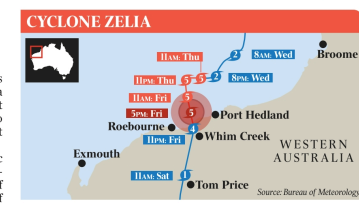
Residents of Western Australia's Pilbara region are being warned a category 5 cyclone off the coast could cause "significant threat to lives and property" in the next 24 hours.

The potentially catastrophic weather system has left large miners preparing to have a swath of destruction cut through one of Australia's mining heartlands.

WA emergency services commissioner Darren Klemm has warned residents to follow all directions from authorities as conditions worsen.

"The intensity of tropical cyclone Zelia means there is significant threat to lives and property and I urge people to follow the directions of emergency services in the Pilbara," he said. "We have significantly increased our resources in the past 24 hours in preparation for the destructive winds and heavy rainfall."

He said authorities expected the category 5 tropical cyclone to cross the Pilbara Coast between Dampier and the Grey, with Karatha and Port Hedland "both at risk of direct impact".



It's expected the system will cross the coast late on Friday.

Mr Klemm said resources were arriving into WA from interstate to ensure the best protection for residents is provided.

"This cyclone has been particularly problematic for us because of the uncertainty of where it will cross the coast," he said.

"But our request for a helicopter for the national fleet to provide evacuation capability has been approved and it is expected to arrive in the Pilbara from NSW on Saturday."

An evacuation centre is open at the youth and community hub in South Hedland. Mr Klemm said a second evacuation centre would be announced shortly.

Great Northern Highway was now closed between Port Hedland and Broome and between Port Hedland and the Roadhouse.

The northwestern Coastal Highway was also closed between Woburn and Port Hedland.

Major iron ore producers Rio Tinto, BHP, Fortescue and Gina Rinehart's Roy Hill have all taken precautions as Cyclone Zelia was upgraded to category 5 status with warnings of wind gust of up to 285km/h and heavy rain.

It shapes as the strongest cyclone to hit WA's Pilbara since at least 2007 and is set to disrupt iron ore and LNG production.

Shell said there would be no offtake from its Prelude floating LNG operation northeast of Broome until at least Sunday because of the wild weather.

Rio Tinto said worker safety was its priority, with the latest cyclone bearing down on its mines, rail and port operations.

Port Hedland, used by BHP, Fortescue, Roy Hill and Mineral Resources to export iron ore, has been shut since Wednesday.

Disused iron ore carrier Lambert port to ships on Wednesday. Dampier port is now shut down and Rio has halted rail operations.

"It is too early to say how long port and rail operations will be closed and what the impact will be," a Rio spokesperson said.

The company has acknowledged first-quarter shipments will be hit by the impact of Cyclone Sean, and closures from Cyclone Taliah and Cyclone Vince.

BHP sent all non-essential workers to Perth with all flights in and out of Port Hedland now cancelled until further notice.

"For the safety of our people and our community, our Port Hedland operations have been paused, and our teams have been instructed to shelter at home or at camp until emergency authorities have advised otherwise," a BHP spokesperson said.

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