25 June 2013

Alan Woodward
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Dear Mr Woodward

Discussion Paper - Telehealth and eMental Health in Australia

beyondblue; the national depression and anxiety initiative appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the Discussion Paper '**Telehealth and eMental Health in Australia**' generated from the Roundtable in June 2012.

The Discussion Paper identifies a number of challenges associated with the delivery of e-mental health, particularly telehealth. Identification of these challenges is an important step towards ensuring that e-mental health services are continuously improved and, also, to enable equitable access to care across different population groups.

beyondblue believes the use of e-mental health, including telehealth, has the potential to increase access to mental health information, resources and treatment and, therefore, reduce the burden of depression and anxiety. Over a 12 month period, most Australians with depression and anxiety do not receive treatment due to a wide range of factors (for example, location of services, transport difficulties, social isolation, lack of servcies, financial barriers and stigma).[i] E-mental health services and programs, as well as online information, support and assessment sites, provide an opportunity to reduce barriers to accessing such services and information.[ii] More broadly, however, it will be necessary to improve levels of online and digital health literacy to ensure people have the skills and knowledge to access evidence-based information, identify the programs that best meet their needs and make informed decisions about their care. The Federal Government's e-mental health portal mind*health*connect has begun to provide a gateway to self-directed support, mental health information and low-intensity services and it would be beneficial for telehealth servcies to also be profiled. This would assist clients and carers with the ability to navigate the telehealth landscape, providing them with a simple access point.

beyondblue supports integration of e-mental health services as a core component of Australia's mental health service system. Better service coordination and triaging of clients are central to this, ensuring that services provided are most appropriate to clients needs. Step-up, step-down services, as a form of community-based care, can complement existing services and also include e-mental health components. The *beyondblue* Community Access Program (bbCAP) is a trial designed to provide easily-accessible, low-intensity psychological help and support for people with mild to moderate depression and anxiety. The bbCAP will enable people to access specially trained coaches in their community for client centred therapy without having to see a GP first. If higher intensive support is required, individuals will be referred to programs such as Access to Allied Pyschological Services (ATAPS) and Better Access. Regardless of where a person may be on the mental health continuum (e.g. mild depression through to severe depression and/or anxiety), this stepped care model can provide the most appropriate care for the individual and as such, a central component of this model will be the utilisation of e-mental health information, tools and services to support the individual.

Additionally, research consistently shows that the overall prevalence of mental health disorders follows a social gradient, with higher rates associated with low income, insecure housing, limited education, recent unemployment, high demand or low control work, child abuse or neglect, poor neighbourhood conditions, and low social support.[iii] *beyondblue* supports the broader scope of e-mental health services to include housing, disability, community, employment and other aspects, thereby addressing the social determinants of mental health while enabling access to mental health services as appropriate. It is also important to ensure that professionals working in these distinct yet related areas, also recognise the potential role of e-mental health and telehealth services to support the overall well-being of their clients.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that it is essential to continue to strengthen the evidence base of e-mental health. This includes the continual evaluation of program and services to ensure they are efficient, effective and responsive to social, cultural and technological changes.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Discussion Paper. We would welcome receiving further communication on this work and any work that the Lifeline Foundation intends to conduct in this area in the future.

Yours sincerely

Kate Carnell AO
CEO, *beyondblue*

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[i] Christiansen, H., & Hickie, I. (2010). E-mental health: A new era in delivery of mental health services. *Medical Journal of Australia; 192 (11); S2-S3.*

[ii] Christiansen, H., & Hickie, I. (2010). E-mental health: A new era in delivery of mental health services. *Medical Journal of Australia; 192 (11); S2-S3.*

[iii] Fisher, M., & Baum, F. (2010). The social determinants of mental health: Implications for research and health promotion. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry; 44; 1057-1063.*