

Local practice leads way in national mental health trial

A general practice in the Noosa hinterland is leading the way in a national trial of an innovative mental health service developed by the Black Dog Institute.

StepCare is an online assessment tool which can help detect symptoms of depression, anxiety and risky drinking in patients visiting their GP, simply by answering a series of questions on a tablet as they wait for their appointment.

Once the survey is completed, an assessment of their mental wellbeing is generated and securely sent to their GP's clinical software.

The results, along with personalised treatment options if needed, are already in front of the GP when the patient's appointment begins.

Cooroy Family Practice has screened 1,000 patients using this tool since joining the trial in November 2019, more than any other clinic taking part across the country.

Practice owner Vivianne Dawalibi said her staff's holistic approach to person-centred care has helped make their use of StepCare so successful.

"Our practice nurse started including the screening as 'business as usual' when conducting patients' observations and other care plans, and our GPs were incredibly supportive of the initiative," Ms Dawalibi said.

"They found that StepCare was an important step in initiating conversations about mental illness for those who otherwise would or could not disclose their concerns, including those at risk of suicide.

"Now, for Cooroy Family Practice patients, talking about their mental health is just part of attending the surgery."

Five other local general practices have been part of the StepCare trial, which launched in 2017 and is supported with funding from Central Queensland, Wide Bay, Sunshine Coast PHN.

The PHN's senior manager Robb Major said there was strong evidence that early identification of mental health challenges played a crucial role in early recovery.

"Implementing opportunistic screening like this in general practice has shown to be an effective way of offering the right level of support at the right time," Mr Major said.

"We are pleased to fund an initiative that has made a difference to the mental wellbeing of the local community.

"It is great to see that the program has been so well received."

The Black Dog Institute's Head of Implementation Practice Janey McGoldrick praised the team at Cooroy Family Practice and their proactive approach to screening for mental health.

"Cooroy Family Practice has demonstrated a huge commitment to people in their local community, which has ensured many additional people can access support," said Ms McGoldrick.

"For every 16 patients who were offered StepCare screening [across Australia], the service identified 1 patient with undiagnosed mental health symptoms.

"Overall, we have been finding that StepCare detected depression and/or anxiety in more than 40% of patients who were screened at their general practice."

The StepCare trial will finish in September, with related findings to be published in 2022.

MEDIA RELEASE

14 July 2021



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**For more information contact: Jasmin Midgley, Senior Media and Communications Officer,
Central Queensland, Wide Bay, Sunshine Coast PHN on 0451 300 050.**