

Media release

National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre

Medicine

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Centre of Research Excellence will target hidden burden of mental health and substance use

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The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales will lead a new Centre of Research Excellence (CRE) targeting co-occurring mental illness and substance use – a debilitating comorbidity which affects more than 300,000 Australians every year.

The world first Centre of Research Excellence in Mental Health and Substance Use: Translating Innovative Prevention and Treatment will receive \$2.5 million in National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) funding over the next five years. It will be led by NDARC's Prof Maree Teesson in collaboration with Prof Amanda Baker (University of Newcastle), Prof Paul Haber (University of Sydney), and Associate Prof Andrew Baillie (Macquarie University).

Other UNSW researchers are Dr Katherine Mills (NDARC), Dr Frances Kay-Lambkin (NDARC) and Professor Helen Christensen from the Black Dog Institute.

Mental health and substance use disorders account for more years of life lost due to disability than any other disorder and are second only to cancer and cardiovascular disease as leading causes of disease burden. In young Australians (15 – 24 years) the top 10 causes of illness are dominated by mental and substance use disorders. Around 35 per cent of individuals with a substance use disorder also have a mental illness, most commonly depression or anxiety. Around 80 per cent of people in treatment for substance use disorders have experienced trauma and nearly half have active post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

"When mental health and substance use disorders occur together they are extremely difficult to treat as both conditions serve to maintain or exacerbate the other" says Professor Teesson.

"These co morbidities lead to very poor treatment outcomes and severe illness in the long term shortening lives by 20-30 years compared to people without such conditions. Treatment and prevention of these comorbid mental health and substance use disorders are one of health's most significant challenges.

"While awareness of the extent of the problem and treatment options have increased significantly over the past few years it is still common for the substance use and the mental health problems to be treated separately. This leaves individuals on a merry-go-round of untreated disorders, the one feeding the other, leading to years of unnecessary suffering."

Chief Investigators on the CRE in Mental Health and Substance Use are: Professor Teesson (UNSW); Professor Amanda Baker, University of Newcastle, Dr Katherine Mills (NDARC), Dr Frances Kay-Lambkin (NDARC), Professor Paul Haber (University of Sydney); Associate Professor Andrew Baillie (Macquarie University); Professor Helen Christensen (UNSW); Professor Max Birchwood (University of Birmingham UK); Professor Bonnie Spring (Northwestern University Medical School, USA), Professor Kathleen Brady (Medical University of South Carolina).

- The CRE is one of 17 announced by the government yesterday, sharing 42.3 million in medical research funding. Professor Teesson is also an investigator on a new CRE for improving suicide prevention in Australia, to be led by Professor Helen Christensen of the Black Dog Institute.

NDARC's Professor Louisa Degenhardt is an investigator on a CRE led by the University of Queensland: Evidence-Based Mental Health Planning: Translating Evidence into Policy and Services.

- Also announced by the NHMRC was the appointment of NDARC's deputy director, Associate Prof Anthony Shakeshaft, to the NHMRC Council. A/Prof Shakeshaft will take up a three year term and, with his fellow Council members, will provide expert advice to NHMRC CEO Warwick Andersen.

Prof Teesson was appointed to the NHMRC Health Care Committee.

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