



The Royal
Australian &
New Zealand
College of
Psychiatrists



Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists
Submission to the Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme
January 2023

Improve the mental health of communities

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists Submission

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About the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists

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 governments on mental health care. The RANZCP is the peak body representing psychiatrists in Australia and New Zealand and as a bi-national college has strong ties with associations in the Asia-Pacific region.

The RANZCP has more than 7,700 members including more than 5,600 qualified psychiatrists and over 2,100 members who are training to qualify as psychiatrists. Psychiatrists are clinical leaders in the provision of mental health care in the community and use a range of evidence-based treatments to support a person in their journey of recovery.

Introduction

The RANZCP welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the [Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme](#) (Royal Commission). Our submission, informed by feedback from a range of members of the RANZCP's expert committees, responds to the following section of the Royal Commission's [terms of reference](#):

“Acknowledging the harm caused to affected members of the Australian community by the debt assessment and recovery scheme known as Robodebt ... the kinds of non-pecuniary impacts the scheme had on individuals, particularly vulnerable individuals, and their families”.

Psychiatrists have direct experience of value to the Royal Commission. Psychiatrists are committed to providing and promoting high quality mental health care in the community. Due to the disproportionate levels of poverty among those with a mental health condition, psychiatrists are aware of the impact that the effective provision of social security payments has on such groups.[1-2]

Trauma

The RANZCP wishes to emphasise the Robodebt scheme's traumatic impact on victims. Trauma can present in various forms and in varied contexts and may be defined as the broad psychological and neurobiological effects of an event, or series of events, which produces experiences of overwhelming fear, stress, helplessness or horror. The RANZCP contends that the experiences of the Robodebt scheme's victims reflects the interpersonal and prolonged nature of trauma, including the interplay of power dynamics and vulnerability, subjective experiences of cumulative stress levels, and the suddenness and uncontrollability of repeated stressor/s (debt collection efforts). This is demonstrated through the following testimonies:

“We heard from people who had health conditions that were aggravated by the mere receipt of a Robodebt and dealing with the issue. People had to take time off work to deal with it. It caused stress within families because of the fact that people had received the debt... it caused the mental health issues for a lot of people just because, you know, it was an awful thing to go through.”

[Hearing Block 2](#), 16 December 2022

“We were talking about people with a mental illness, people who were homeless, people escaping domestic violence, people requiring being treated for an illness and people with a serious addiction. And we were alarmed that this was the kind of policy that was being pursued by the government after extensive efforts to bring to their attention that - even within the existing scope of the Scheme, the level of human distress.”

[Hearing Block 2](#), 16 December 2022

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"...doing my head in and making me suicidal."

[Robo-debt client stories](#), Victorian Legal Aid

Trauma can cause a range of co-morbid problems including mental and physical health conditions, suicidality and self-harming behaviours, harmful substance use and addictions, dissociation, self-esteem issues. The consequences of trauma exposure can also have a cascading impact throughout families and communities, leading to ongoing relational and intergenerational trauma.

The RANZCP acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a unique risk of trauma as the result of historical trauma associated with colonisation (dispossession, displacement, disease, genocide, cultural assimilation and the disruption of kinship systems) and ongoing collective trauma (economic deprivation, social marginalisation, discrimination, incarceration and other forms of racism). The RANZCP therefore urges that victims of the scheme are offered free, culturally safe, mental health treatment to ameliorate any impacts of trauma. For more information please see RANZCP Position Statement 100: [Trauma Informed Practice](#) and Position Statement 105: [Cultural Safety](#).

Systemic discrimination within the social security system

The Robodebt scheme and its impact on victims illustrates the discriminatory design of social security processes and the need for subsequent reform. The rudimentary nature of claims for social security payments imposes disadvantages on people with mental health conditions, delaying their recovery and/or compounding suffering.

The process of claiming the Disability Support Pension (DSP) has an adverse effect on the mental health of claimants, due to 'aspects involved in obtaining and/or staying on ... including how claimants are treated by government staff and how claims eligibility are assessed'.^[3] Structural and administrative aspects of obtaining the DSP create psychosocial stress, resulting in declines to mental health. Similar systemic discrimination is detailed within the Centre for Social Impact's [Social Security and Stigma in Australia](#) report, which finds the complexity of the social security system and lack of information and support disadvantages people who are likely to be seeking support at times of increased distress.

This is evidenced by testimony at the Royal Commission, where claimants experienced discrimination due to the system design practices of agencies, particular those hired to collect 'owed' monies.

"...an aggressive abuse of government power causing extensive stress, anxiety and harm amongst thousands of people who were caught up in the process."

[Hearing Block 2](#), 16 December 2022

This testimony demonstrates how this has unjustifiably stigmatised claimants with mental health conditions, compounds their suffering and placing extra strain upon their families and carers. By discouraging people with mental health condition to seek entitled payments there is also a greater risk of worsening one's condition. Greater costs are therefore incurred by the responding public mental health system, as opposed to a fit-for-purpose social security.

Recommendations for reform

The RANZCP contends that the impact of the Robodebt scheme reveals intrinsic shortcomings of the social security system, and the need for reform to prevent further disadvantage of people with mental health conditions. The findings of the Royal Commission should be used to inform long-term systemic reform to Australia's social security system.

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Social security systems need to be understood as part of the health-care system to ensure that people receive support that aids one's recovery and wellbeing.

The RANZCP recommends that Services Australia:

- Introduce less adversarial pathways to social security claims or debt collection measures to avoid discrimination against people with mental health conditions.
- Endorse trauma informed practice approaches when managing claims of people with a reported mental health condition, with consideration given to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Ensure that trauma informed practice is incorporated into training, recruitment of staff, and funding, informed by the lived experience of people with mental health conditions.
- Provide clear, publicly available information to improve access to social security supports for people with a mental health condition.

References

1. OECD. Sick on the Job?: Myths and Realities about Mental Health and Work, Mental Health and Work. OECD Publishing. 2012.
2. Isaacs AN, Enticott J, Meadows G, Inder B. Lower Income Levels in Australia Are Strongly Associated With Elevated Psychological Distress: Implications for Healthcare and Other Policy Areas. *Front Psychiatry*. 2018 Oct 26;9:536
3. Milner A, Kavanagh A, McAllister A, Aitken Z. The impact of the disability support pension on mental health: evidence from 14 years of an Australian cohort. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*. 2020 44:307-312.