



MEDIA RELEASE

***Australian Story* highlights consequences of mental health system failures**

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The tragic murder of Dr Khulod Maarouf-Hassan is the subject of tonight's *Australian Story* (ABC TV) and highlights the ongoing failure of Australia's mental health system.

Dr Maarouf-Hassan was killed in her surgery by Samuel Benjamin, who was later found not guilty by reason of mental illness, more specifically a psychotic delusion that the whole medical profession was trying to kill him.

The tragic murder of this respected health professional came after Mr Benjamin had apparently sought help on several occasions in the preceding months. His cries for help were repeatedly ignored and his mental health worsened.

The murder of Dr Maarouf-Hassan should be a catalyst for mental health system reform. In order to get help now, a person must be critically unwell and generally must attend a hospital. The last national mental health survey (1997) indicated that around two-thirds of people with a mental illness get no care in any year. Mental illness goes largely untreated in Australian society and people experiencing low prevalence disorders such as schizophrenia are at particular risk.

There is clear evidence that, just as with cancer, the earlier treatment is provided to a person with mental illness the better the outcome. Yet Australia lacks the early intervention and first episode services needed to ensure that people get the care they need before they become a risk to themselves or others. Instead, Australia's mental health service is currently geared almost exclusively around providing care only once a person has become acutely unwell. Unlike cancer, we commonly wait until the problem has grown to acute proportions before any care is available. This is abysmal health care and creates risks for both the person and the community.

Over 11% of patients who see their general practitioner have a psychological problem and depression is the fourth most commonly managed health issue in general practice. The MHCA has consistently advocated for the significant role GPs play in managing mental illness in the community, ensuring GPs have good training in mental illness and that they have easy access to a range of other specialist and allied health professionals in this work.

GPs deal with tens of thousands of mental health issues every day and the proportion of people with mental illness who pose any threat is extremely small. Research confirms that the vast majority of people with a mental illness, including those with severe mental illness, do not commit crimes. Rather, and reflecting their vulnerability, people with severe mental illness are more than 11 times more likely to be victims of a violent crime than the general population.

The MHCA hopes that today's *Australian Story* is a spur for reforms designed to ensure that GPs are providing primary mental health care as part of a new and better system designed specifically around early intervention and multi-disciplinary care.

Media Contact: Simon Tatz on 0402 613 745 or 02 6285 3100

The Mental Health Council of Australia is the independent, national representative body of the mental health sector in Australia.
Ph:(02) 6285 3100 Fax:(02) 6285 2166 E-mail: admin@mhca.org.au www.mhca.org.au