

Trade Release

Expectant and new parents encouraged to pick up the phone this Women's Health Week

- **New independent research reveals telehealth services have delivered equal, if not better results, on clinical screening measures for depression and anxiety**
- **With benefits for telehealth set to cease beyond September 2020, two thirds of perinatal patients would no longer be eligible**
- **Gidget Foundation Australia is urging the government to reconsider these changes**

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has seen Australian service providers turn to telehealth solutions to deliver vital services to those in need. Despite Australian's mental health in a state of despair, the government is set to cease Medicare-rebated telehealth services to Sept 30 for all Australians. However, the number of Medicare-rebated psychological sessions will be extended from 10 to 20 for those living in a declared lockdown area.

This was welcome news to the Gidget Foundation Australia who are striving to have a 20 session 'Perinatal Treatment Plan' standardised across the country. Currently delivering their perinatal counselling via telehealth new research evaluating their telehealth program reveals that the service delivers perinatal psychological treatment with equal to, if not improved results, on clinical screening measures compared with face-to-face.

Michaela Durrant is the Program Director at Gidget Foundation Australia and said the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) was a good indicator of how their Start Talking telehealth program really stacked up.

"Clients from our Start Talking program had an average EPDS score reduction of 7.6 compared to clients from our face-to-face services reporting an average EPDS score reduction of 6.7," Durrant shared.

"The results were similar for all clients across the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21) with the exception of stress. Telehealth clients noted a score reduction in stress of 5.2 compared to in-person clients indicating a score reduction of 3.4 for stress. We widely put this down to the fact that parents were able to adapt more effectively to telehealth sessions and enjoy the flexibility that it offers."

CEO of Gidget Foundation Australia, Arabella Gibson says the independent evaluation was conducted by PwC to assess the effectiveness, overall access and wellbeing benefits of both the telehealth and face-to-face mental health services Gidget Foundation Australia offers.

"We were pleased with the results and gratified to see the many ways that our telehealth program Start Talking really held its own against in-person sessions. The response from both our clinicians as well as our clients was generally positive all round with 82% of telehealth clients unable to think of any way that their experience could be improved.

"Clinicians reported that having the opportunity to see parents in their natural environment via video chat and offer positive reinforcement really assisted in strengthening relationships between the clinician and their client," Gibson says.

During the pandemic, Medicare Benefits for psychological telehealth services were expanded to cover all regions under the Modified Monash Model. Unfortunately, this is expected to cease beyond mid-September 2020 which would see over two thirds (69%) of Gidget Foundation Australia's patients no longer eligible for Medicare-funded telehealth treatments.

Australian Psychological Society (APS) Chief Executive Officer Ros Knight says, "Psychologists see first-hand the impact of perinatal depression or anxiety on new mothers, every day. With the added challenges 2020 has presented to us all, we have been relieved to be able to continue supporting these new mothers through the use of telehealth appointments. The APS strongly urges the Government to continue making telehealth available, where it is clinically assessed as appropriate for the new mother, beyond September."

With one in five (20%) new mothers and one in ten (10%) new fathers experiencing perinatal depression and anxiety, Gidget Foundation Australia believes that specialist perinatal treatment is a key component of recovery.

"When an expectant or new parent is experiencing those overwhelming feelings of depression or anxiety, sometimes more support is required. Many of our Start Talking clients reported that the telehealth option enabled them to receive support that they couldn't have accessed otherwise. The Gidget Foundation team can not only offer hands-on, practical advice but also connect them with other local services or support groups," Gibson says.

Since May 2018, Gidget Foundation Australia's Start Talking telehealth program has been delivered into every state and territory in Australia. While regional and remote communities often lack the resources to offer specialist face-to-face support, those living in metro areas also face challenges accessing in-person services, due to factors such as birth trauma and surgical procedures.

A common theme throughout the Start Talking evaluation was the convenience of the telehealth services and how much easier they were for clients to engage in, Gibson explains.

"For families in both regional and metro areas, telehealth services performed higher than face-to-face in terms of wait times, frequency of appointments as well as seeing 15% more postpartum clients. We saw a significant number of parents point out that holding consultations in the comfort of their own home was a driving factor in the success of the service. It meant that many new parents felt secure in the privacy of their own space and didn't have to travel to access the service, which is so often challenging and stressful for vulnerable new parents." Gibson says.

One such parent that can speak to the benefits of the Start Talking telehealth program is Tamara Brindley. After a traumatic birth, extended hospital stay and issues with feeding, Tamara was left feeling isolated and disconnected from her new baby.

"Living in an extremely small town and being a mental health professional myself, I couldn't speak to any of my colleagues about what I was dealing with. The telehealth sessions I did with Gidget Foundation Australia were so incredibly helpful for me. They happen in your own home, no need to get dressed up or pretend you have it all together. I didn't have to disrupt my sleeping baby and when she did wake up, she could just play and our appointments continued without disruption. I was able to privately and confidentially work through all of the difficulties I was experiencing at my own pace," Tamara says.

Given the proven clinical outcomes, this Women's Health Week, Gidget Foundation Australia is urging the government to maintain the nationwide COVID Medicare Benefits for telehealth to ensure vital services can continue to reach Australia's vulnerable expectant and new parents.

About Gidget Foundation Australia

Gidget Foundation Australia provides support for Perinatal Depression and Anxiety through treatment services for families suffering emotional distress during pregnancy and early parenting and education and awareness programs for health professionals and the community.

Their mission is to promote the importance of emotional wellbeing amongst expectant and new parents, their healthcare providers and the wider community to ensure that those in need receive timely, appropriate and supportive care.

About the Research & Citations

Gidget Foundation Australia commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) (Consulting) Australia to conduct an independent evaluation of the Start Talking program. The report draws on quantitative and qualitative data collected from Australians who had a Start Talking consultation between 1 January and 31 December 2019.

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