

Media Release

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

- **Despite fears the pandemic will leave long-term mental health scarring, the government is set to cease Medicare-rebated telehealth services for all Australians on Sept 30**
- **Gidget Foundation Australia is calling for the government to standardise a 20 session 'Perinatal Treatment Plan'**
- **New independent research reveals telehealth services have delivered equal, if not better results, on clinical screening measures for depression and anxiety**
- **During Women's Health Week, Gidget Foundation Australia is encouraging expectant and new parents to check in on their health and pick up the phone if they're not feeling okay**

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 psychology 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.

CEO of Gidget Foundation Australia, Arabella Gibson says the independent evaluation was conducted to assess the effectiveness, overall access and wellbeing benefits of both the telehealth and face-to-face counselling 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. During the pandemic there has been a huge shift in the way our health systems operate as a whole and we are hopeful that the government will choose to extend the Medicare benefits to telehealth as well as considering an extension to the number of rebated psychologist sessions," Gibson says.

During the pandemic, Medicare Benefits for telehealth services were expanded to cover all of Australia indefinitely. 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."

With one in five (20%) mothers and one in ten (10%) fathers experiencing perinatal anxiety and depression, Gidget Foundation Australia believes that specialist perinatal counselling is a key step on the road to recovery.

"When an expectant or new parent is experiencing those overwhelming feelings of anxiety or depression, sometimes a chat with the local GP just isn't enough. It's critical that when parents are in this fragile state, they're getting support from professionals who specialise in perinatal psychological support. Our 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 lack the proper resources to offer specialist face-to-face support, the program is just as essential for expectant and new parents living in major metro areas.

A common theme throughout the Start Talking evaluation was the convenience of the telehealth services and how much easier they were for our 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 widely put this down to the fact that leaving the house can be difficult and quite stressful for new mums and dads,” Gibson says.

One such parent that can speak to the benefits of the Start Talking telehealth program is Gidget Angel, Edwina Sharrock.

“Having a baby is a huge time of transition for new parents and for some people, leaving the house can feel overwhelming. The priority during this time should be on rest, recovery, establishing feeding and bonding with your new baby. The Start Talking telehealth services mean new mums don’t have to travel far away from their support networks, worry about navigating traffic or finding a park – they can just focus on getting the support and love they need from their session. The closest Gidget House for me is over 500kms away, so telehealth was really the only option for me to connect with a perinatal specialist as we just don’t have them in regional Australia,” Sharrock said.

With quality telehealth services more readily available than ever before, this Women’s Health Week (7th-11th September) Gidget Foundation Australia is encouraging expectant and new parents to check in on their health and pick up the phone if they’re not feeling okay.

“Pregnancy and childbirth brings joy but also many challenges for new mums, in particular, finding enough time in their day to look after themselves as well as their baby. It is so important to practise self-care and set aside time for themselves to ensure they can better manage the pressures, both emotional and physical, of pregnancy and parenting,” Gibson says.

Ends.

About Gidget Foundation Australia

The Gidget Foundation Australia provides support for Perinatal Depression and Anxiety through support 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.



Contact:

Natalie Speranza, Gidget Foundation Australia

M: 0413 672 279 E: natalie.speranza@gidgetfoundation.org.au

