

Defence mental health support lacks funds, inquiry finds

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AUSTRALIAN soldiers with mental health problems will keep falling through the cracks without an injection of "significant" funding and an overhaul of defence support services, according to the head of two still secret inquiries.

Professor David Dunt, who was commissioned last year by the Federal Government to investigate the mental health support system for former and serving soldiers, has also revealed that the ADF's support services work with inadequate information-sharing.

Professor Dunt spoke publicly yesterday about his confidential inquiry into mental health in the Australian Defence Force.

He said the Federal Government and the ADF needed to "follow through on their realisation that there is a problem with mental health services and to put in place a more contemporary best-practice service".

"Routine mental health services at barracks are really not optimal at this point in time. Part of this is to do with funding. The Government and the ADF appreciate this and know what has to be done," Professor Dunt said.

On Monday, The Age revealed the findings of Professor Dunt's other inquiry into suicide among veterans. That inquiry revealed that most former soldiers are unlikely to be receiving proper treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder and called for widespread changes in the support given by the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

It has been estimated that up to 10 per cent of Australian soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan will suffer long-term mental health problems.

"A lot of soldiers come back from war profoundly unsettled. It is amazing what some soldiers go through. That is why they deserve special treatment when they get home," Professor Dunt said.

The Melbourne University public health expert has identified three areas in need of major change in ADF mental health support services: funding, training at the primary care level, and better co-ordination between the various tiers of the defence support system.

He said psychologists posted on defence bases were "hard pressed" to meet all challenges posed by traumatised soldiers.

"The ADF is getting better at dealing with mental health, but sometimes at a junior level they still do not have a good insight into mental health problems ... you still get people who are not sympathetic at all," he said. But he stressed that defence top brass supported change.

Professor Dunt said more had to be done to encourage soldiers to seek help and to reduce their fear that acknowledging a problem would lead to discharge.

A spokeswoman for Defence Personnel Minister Warren Snowdon said the Government was considering Professor Dunt's inquiries in light of the coming defence white paper.