

Legislative Council Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in NSW

Response from the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia to questions taken on notice

6 March
2025

The Pharmaceutical Society of Australia (PSA) gave evidence at the public hearing held on 6 February 2025. PSA is pleased to provide responses to the questions taken on notice.

Mental Health First Aid Training Evaluation

Dr AMANDA COHN: I had a couple of questions. I'm following up from the Chair's line of questioning. I'm also interested that if we're rolling out a large-scale screening program, that needs to be followed up with intervention. The PSA, in your written submission, you've recommended mental health first aid training as well, which intuitively makes sense. I'm interested to know if that has been trialled, if you've got any evaluation measures for the success of mental health first aid training for pharmacists.

LILY PHAM: In recent years a lot of university providers now also have the funding to provide mental health first aid training to their students. Mental health first aid is only—you get the accreditation for three years and then you need to then refresh it. For the newer graduates and the early career pharmacists, many of them do have that mental health first aid training. But it's the backlog of the pharmacists who have graduated earlier than that that will require mental health first aid training. From an evaluation standpoint, I know that there has been some funding in different States for mental health first aid for pharmacists through the PSA as well. Ms Fairjones, would you mind speaking on that?

AMANDA FAIRJONES: Not off the top of my head, but I could absolutely take that question on notice and go to our teams and see if there has been any formal evaluations done on mental health first aid training for pharmacists.

Mental health first aid (MHFA) training is designed for pharmacists and pharmacy support staff and teaches participants how to recognise the signs and symptoms of mental health problems and crises, how to offer and provide initial help, and how to offer professional and social support options to ensure the person receives appropriate help.

Pharmacists are increasingly mental health first aid trained, and this has been facilitated through collaboration with Governments, not for profits and Primary Health Networks funding training programs for pharmacists. Ideally, pharmacists should attend MHFA refresher trainings every three years, which can be difficult to complete without additional funding.

There has also been good uptake of MHFA training within pharmacy university programs, however, it is not mandatory and the capacity to provide this training changes over time.

PSA has received funding from the Australian Government, the South Australian Government and the Western Australian Mental Health Commission to provide MHFA training to pharmacists. In 2020, the NSW Government also provided funding to the Pharmacy Guild to provide MHFA training to NSW pharmacists.

Below, you will find evaluations of MHFA training from published papers in Australia and overseas, as well as two internal evaluations conducted by PSA for the MHFA training programs PSA was funded to deliver.

MHFA training evaluation in the Australian context

1. This Australian study (PharMibridge) found that training programs for pharmacists to support people with severe and persistent mental health conditions reduced stigma and increased pharmacists' confidence, comfort and knowledge about providing medicine information to people with mental health conditions.

Ng R, El-Den S, Collins JC, et al. Evaluation of a training program to support the implementation of a community pharmacist-led support service for people living with severe and persistent mental illness. *J Am Pharm Assoc* 2023;63(3):807–16. Available at:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1544319123000079>

Mental Health First Aid training evaluation for University Students

1. The below provide insight into the current offerings (as of 2020) of Mental Health First Aid by university providers, including in pharmacy.

Pham L, Moles RJ, O'Reilly CL, Carrillo MJ, El-Den S. Mental Health First Aid training and assessment in Australian medical, nursing and pharmacy curricula: a national perspective using content analysis. *BMC Med Educ*. 2022 Jan 29;22(1):70. Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8800543/>

2. This study explored the impact of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training and simulated psychosis care role-plays on pharmacy students' stigma, confidence, and behaviours when supporting people experiencing mental health symptoms or crises. The results showed following completion of the training, reduced stigma and increased confidence in providing psychosis care.

Tina X. Ung, Claire L. O'Reilly, Rebekah J. Moles, Jack C. Collins et al. Evaluation of Mental Health First Aid Training and Simulated Psychosis Care Role-Plays for Pharmacy Education, *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, Volume 88, Issue 11, 2024. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0002945924110078>

3. This study stimulated role-plays of mental health symptoms and crises, enacted by trained actors, to effectively assess pharmacists' intended mental health support behaviours. Overall, the role-plays significantly increased pharmacists' intentions in supporting a person experiencing mental health crises such as suicide and psychosis, as well as encouraging other supports.

Tina X. Ung, Sarira El-Den, Rebekah J. Moles, Jack C. Collins et al. Pharmacists' mental health support behaviours with simulated patients: A mixed-methods pilot study, *Journal of the American Pharmacists Association*, Volume 65, Issue 1, 2025. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1544319124002942>

4. This study demonstrated that MHFA training can reduce pharmacy students' mental health stigma, improve recognition of mental disorder and improve confidence in providing services to consumers with a mental illness in the pharmacy setting.

O'Reilly CL, Bell JS, Kelly PJ, Chen TF. Impact of Mental Health First aid Training on Pharmacy Students' Knowledge, Attitudes and Self-Reported Behaviour: A Controlled Trial. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*. 2011;45(7):549-557. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3109/00048674.2011.585454>

Mental Health First Aid training evaluation in the US Context

1. This evaluation of MHFA by pharmacists in the US found trained pharmacy professionals have low reluctance and high levels of confidence in using the range of skills taught during the MHFA program.

Witry M, Karamese H, Pudlo A (2020) Evaluation of participant reluctance, confidence, and self-reported behaviours since being trained in a pharmacy Mental Health First Aid initiative. PLoS ONE 15(5): e0232627. Available at: <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0232627>

PSA MHFA Training Program Evaluation

MHFA training – South Australian pharmacists and pharmacy staff

As of 31st December 2024, 467 pharmacists and pharmacy staff have completed the training under this program. A summary of participant feedback on MHFA training delivered by PSA is as follows:

- **Accessibility and usability of training:**
 - 97.1% of participants reported positive feedback regarding accessibility and usability.
- **Satisfaction with training provider/trainer (PSA):**
 - 95.6% of participants reported satisfaction with the training.
- **Ability/confidence to identify early signs of mental ill-health and offer support/referral:**
 - 97.3% of participants reported improved ability and confidence.
- **Number of people referred for additional support:**
 - 20.6% of participants reported referring individuals for additional support, including to GPs, specialist services, and helplines.
- **Application of MHFA skills in the workplace:**
 - 60.0% of participants reported being able to apply the skills developed from the training.
- **Impact on professional practice:**
 - 97.1% of participants reported that the training had a positive impact on their professional practice in providing initial support to individuals experiencing mental health problems or crises.

Participant feedback was positive, and highlighted the following key points:

- Increased confidence in approaching and supporting individuals with mental health issues.
- Practical skills development that was not covered during university studies.
- Improved mental health literacy and ability to have meaningful conversations with patients.
- Enhanced professional practice and ability to provide relevant support and referrals.
- Appreciation for the funding provided by [funder], which enabled participation in the training.

Quotes from participant(s) of the workshops include:

“Very satisfactory, the course has covered essential components of mental health first aid providing me with confidence on how to approach/ assess, listen to the patient and able to provide relevant support.”

“So useful, particularly as a pharmacist because although we are taught the theory behind mental health, actually responding to people experiencing mental health issues is a practical skill that wasn't developed during my university studies, aside from in the context of medication counselling.”

“I did find the course to be educational, and I do hope it has provided me with better tools and it has certainly improved my mental health literacy. I hope my interactions with patients are more beneficial than they may have been in the past. I feel more comfortable having a chat with a patient regarding their mental health whereas before I may have only glossed over that topic. Ultimately, better experience for both patient and me. I appreciate the funding made available via [funder], as it was unlikely, I would have sought to take this course otherwise.”

“I already have a lot of knowledge related to mental health, and as pharmacists we are very knowledgeable with the medicines and other treatments! But it's how we talk to customers with mental health when they need our help the most that was very valuable! So how I handle a situation where a patient with mental health comes into the pharmacy will be very different! More professional, more caring and better equipped at knowing what to do to deescalate the situation and get the person the appropriate help!”

“I believe learning this course has given me a better understanding of mental health, and it is essential that a course like this is to be undertaken by all of us so that there is heightened awareness about mental health and how to identify and deal.”

“Very thought provoking. Made me reflect on previous practice and hope to improve on how I've handled people in the future”

“I feel better equipped in handling or managing clients with mental health issues”

“I feel more competent and confident in dealing with mental health difficulties that may arise in the pharmacy.”

“The training program made a huge difference in my workplace we understand more about mental health especially with people who come in the pharmacy.”

“Initiating meaningful conversations with customers instead of holding back (due to pre MHFA concerns about not being able to appropriately respond to distressed responses)”

“My radar is switched on more after the training for people who mention they are struggling. Specifically, I've been able to keep in contact with an elderly lady who is struggling mentally and not getting adequate support from doctor. The MHFA course has encouraged me to be persistent in encouraging her and her husband that help is available and not to give up. And that we are here as a pharmacy to come in anytime. Yesterday a lady who has just left a DV household came in and she wasn't thinking very clearly. I was able to listen to her and be there for her and then write down some options for housing, clothing, food and encouraged her to see GP for mental health care plan. She knows we are a safe pharmacy space for her to come in to chat anytime.”

MHFA training – Western Australian pharmacists and pharmacy staff

Over June and July 2024, three workshops were held in Western Australia to provide mental health first aid training for pharmacists and pharmacy staff.

- **93% of participants** agreed that they would feel partially or entirely confident to provide support to someone experiencing a mental health problem, experiencing a worsening of an

existing mental health problem or in a mental health crisis' as a result of completing this training.

Blooms Program

LILY PHAM: I guess I might just add quickly as well. A lot of the pharmacists prescribing pilots at the moment have an embedded follow-up service integrated into that framework and that prescribing protocol. That's something that is a possibility with loneliness. On a more slightly off-topic but very adjacent tangent, in Canada—specifically, in Nova Scotia—there is a first-of-its-kind program called the Bloom Program. That is a program that's pharmacist led and looks at the management of people with severe and persistent mental illness, not only around medication management but some of the elements of social prescribing embedded in there. That was piloted with good success and is now embedded as part of that district's day-to-day services, as business as usual. I can definitely look into some of the research findings behind that and put that on notice too.

Please find below links to the research findings behind the Blooms Program, how it works and some preliminary evaluations of the program.

1. Murphy AL, Jacobs LM, Gardner DM. Pharmacists' experiences with the Bloom Program application process. *Can Pharm J (Ott)*. 2020 Nov 16;154(1):42-51. Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7863284/>
2. Murphy, A.L., Gardner, D.M. & Jacobs, L.M. Patient care activities by community pharmacists in a capitation funding model mental health and addictions program. *BMC Psychiatry* **18**, 192 (2018). Available at: <https://bmcpsy psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-018-1746-3>
3. Lauren Haslam, David M. Gardner, Andrea Lynn Murphy. A retrospective analysis of patient care activities in a community pharmacy mental illness and addictions program. *Research in Social and Administrative Pharmacy*, Volume 16, Issue 4, 2020, Pages 522-528, ISSN 1551-7411 Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1551741119301032>
4. Murphy AL, Simon K, Pelletier E, Miller L, Gardner DM. Bloom Program pharmacy teams' experiences providing mental health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Can Pharm J (Ott)*. 2021 Dec 17;155(2):93-100. Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8922227/>

PSA is happy to assist the Committee if anything requires clarification or if further details are needed.

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