



## Media Release

04 April 2012

### **Prime Minister's youth mental health package is an exemplar of how to use expert advice in policy formation**

The announcement today of a very significant package of initiatives aimed to improve the quality, and the effectiveness of the delivery, of mental health services to young people throughout New Zealand is both important in its own right and also a demonstration of how evidence and expert advice can be used effectively to improve policy formation.

The 18 initiatives announced, encompassing school-based measures, family-based programmes, interventions delivered through the internet and social media, and improvements to youth mental health services, form an integrated package which has been designed in the expectation that a holistic approach can make a real difference to improving the resilience of young people as they passage through adolescence and reduce the morbidities that can blight some young people for the rest of their lives.

Adolescence and its associated psychological and social morbidities is an area where policy has to be developed against a background of incomplete knowledge and considerable uncertainty. Formation and evaluation of new policy is made much more difficult by the complexity of the world in which young people grow up.

Thus it is important to acknowledge at the outset that these initiatives will be subject to a review after two years to identify which programmes are making the biggest impact. Ongoing evaluation and review is critical in areas such as this to determine what will be most effective in the various contexts in which young people find themselves. The government must be congratulated for taking such an open approach that explicitly acknowledges the importance of evaluating programmes in a New Zealand setting.

The origin of these initiatives is an exemplar of how policy formation in complex areas can be based on informed scientific advice. In 2009, the Prime Minister asked me to consider the problems associated with the transition through adolescence. Rather than undertake a superficial review, I embarked on a 18-month project that eventually involved more than 30 New Zealand experts and several international contributors.

Intentionally we produced a report, entitled *Improving the transition*, that stayed focused on the scientifically robust evidence and avoided opinion and anecdote. Among its findings were significant concerns about the provision of mental health services to many young people.

Following this report, the Prime Minister initiated an officials group to consider what could be done, taking into account the advice from our report, and their work was subject to iterative review by an expert group chaired by myself. It is primarily from that process that the initiatives announced today emerged.

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