



MEDIA RELEASE – EMBARGOED UNTIL TUESDAY MAY 12TH, 2020

The Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia (MIFA) bluntly warns it is very clear people’s mental health conditions are escalating because of fear, anxiety and social isolation.

MIFA CEO Tony Stevenson says he is alarmed that people with severe and complex mental health conditions are a high risk group for COVID-19 complications. MIFA says people with severe and complex mental health issues are a vulnerable group for COVID-19 complications.

He says people living with schizophrenia (230,000 people across the community) are extremely vulnerable to declining mental health and physical health issues during the pandemic.

MIFA says people with severe mental illness are now four times more likely to die of respiratory disease, two to three times more likely to die from infectious diseases and three to four more times likely to die prematurely than other people in the population.

The Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia (MIFA) has bluntly warned it is very clear people’s mental health conditions are escalating because of fear, anxiety, social isolation and also paranoia.

MIFA CEO, Tony Stevenson, said he is deeply concerned that people with severe and complex mental health conditions are a high risk vulnerable group for COVID-19 complications.

He has made the comments as a new campaign gets under way urging people with mental health issues to reach out and get the help they need.

Tony Stevenson said, “A massive number of Australians are impacted by schizophrenia – a million people – and research shows at least 230,000 people now have schizophrenia.”

Tony Stevenson says people currently living with schizophrenia are very vulnerable to declining mental health and physical health during the current pandemic. He says they require additional support.

Tony Stevenson says it is very clear that people with severe and complex mental illness are a vulnerable group who require priority testing. He says people with mental health issues have been hit very hard by their lack of face-to-face support. He points out many of these people don’t have the devices, plans or data to work around these issues.

The Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia says it is alarming that people with severe mental illness are now four times more likely to die from respiratory disease, two to four times more likely to die from infectious diseases and three to four times more likely to die prematurely than other people in the population.

Tony Stevenson said, "In many ways the most disturbing thing is that in the year 2020 we have a situation where the life expectancy of people with schizophrenia is 19 years less than someone else. It is completely shameful. In essence, people with schizophrenia have the same life expectancy that people had in the 1930s. Bluntly put, it is ridiculous."

"We are out to dispel the many myths out there. There is a significant amount of support out there to help people with issues. People with schizophrenia can and do recover. Some studies suggest as many as 1 in 3 people fully recover. By that I mean recover a sense of your life in the community. Unfortunately there is no cure. There are many myths about people with schizophrenia being violent. The simple truth is they are no more likely to be violent than anybody else. One of the most ridiculous myths is that people with schizophrenia have a split personality. It is total nonsense."

Tony Stevenson said it is very clear that many Australians are currently feeling anxious, stressed and fearful during the current pandemic. He highlights the Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia has a free phone line for people to call. People answering the line will give advice as to who you should speak to in your local area to get support.

Tony Stevenson highlights less than 50% of people who have schizophrenia are actually getting clinical assistance. He says people with schizophrenia and other mental health issues unquestionably need more support to access services and stay connected during the COVID-19 emergency.

Tony Stevenson said, "We know that people with schizophrenia are some of the most vulnerable and socially marginalised people in our communities. Many people with schizophrenia die by the time they are 54. People with schizophrenia are 12 times more likely to die from suicide than the general population. Clearly drastic action is needed."

MIFA says there are a number of early warning signs people should look for that may indicate a person has schizophrenia.

These include:

- Unusual behaviour.
- Changes in mood or rapid mood changes.
- Excessive sleep or loss of energy or sleep disturbances.
- A person withdrawing and isolating themselves from family and friends.
- A clear decline in work or school performance.
- Difficulties with memory/concentration/increased suspiciousness.

MIFA is highlighting the annual costs of psychosis now costs the Australian community \$4.91 billion annually.

Anybody who wants help with mental health issues – including schizophrenia is urged to ring the free number being run by MIFA. **The number is 1800 985 944 or visit www.minetworks.org.au.**

**Media enquiries to Media Key on 03 9769 6488 or 0409 420 112
Tony Stevenson is available for media interviews.**