The Australian Mental Health Leadership program: an overview

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Calls for leadership in mental health in Australia have become more frequent in recent years. This has accompanied the growing realisation that the reforms of the early 1990s have been only partially implemented, at great cost to the mental health and wellbeing of many Australians and those around them as well as to the reputation and appeal of the mental health professions.

But what do people really mean by leadership, and what is it they want? There is a strong tendency in Australia to look to government to provide all the answers, and while the Commonwealth, States and Territories have a clear responsibility to do much more to address the manifold challenges that mental health care in Australia present, the task is not theirs alone. The mental health workforce, consumers and carers also have the potential to make significant contributions. However, leadership is more easily said than done, and for these groups, the required skills and knowledge are hard to come by other than through experience.

The Australian Mental Health Leadership Program (ausMHLP), piloted in 2005-06 and continuing in 2006-07, is a new professional development program that is attempting to address the leadership deficit in mental health by providing leadership training for one professional group within the mental health workforce – psychiatrists.

A one-year, part-time program delivered via a series of short-term residential seminars held around the country, ausMHLP combines group and individual learning for a small group of early career and senior trainee psychiatrists on a range of topics and skill sets relevant to leadership in mental health, including:

- The Australian health and mental health systems (Commonwealth versus state/territory, public versus private)
- National mental health reform – history and current challenges
- The policy formulation process and ways to influence it (media, lobby groups, academic research, formal government processes)
- Service development at a local level
- Leadership theory and practice

The presentation will discuss the origins of ausMHLP, provide an overview of its structure and content in both its first and second years, and efforts to evaluate the program.

Competing interests
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