



Media Release

Expectant and new parents set to miss out on vital telehealth services come September

- **One in five mothers experience perinatal anxiety or depression and need help to recover**
- **New research reveals telehealth services have delivered equal, if not better results, on clinical screening measures for depression and anxiety**
- **With benefits for telehealth set to cease beyond September 2020, two thirds of perinatal patients would no longer be eligible**
- **Gidget Foundation Australia is urging the government to reconsider these changes**

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has seen Australian service providers turn to telehealth solutions to deliver vital services to those in need. New research evaluating Gidget Foundation Australia's telehealth program reveals that the service delivers perinatal counselling with equal to, if not improved results, on clinical screening measures compared with face-to-face.

CEO of Gidget Foundation Australia, Arabella Gibson says the independent evaluation was conducted to assess the effectiveness, overall access and wellbeing benefits of both the telehealth and face-to-face counselling services Gidget Foundation Australia offers.

"We were thrilled with the results and pleasantly surprised to see the many ways that our telehealth program Start Talking really held its own against in-person sessions. While it's been wonderful to see so many organisations start offering telehealth services amidst the pandemic, I truly believe it has an important place in our society all year round and especially for vulnerable expectant and new parents," Gibson says.

During the pandemic, Medicare Benefits for telehealth services were expanded to cover all of Australia. Unfortunately, this is expected to cease beyond September 2020 which would see two thirds (60%) of Gidget Foundation Australia's patients no longer eligible for telehealth services.

Australian Psychological Society (APS) President Ros Knight says, "Psychologists see first-hand the impact of perinatal depression or anxiety on new mothers, every day. With the added challenges 2020 has presented to us all, we have been relieved to be able to continue supporting these new mothers through the use of telehealth appointments. The APS strongly urges the Government to continue making telehealth available, where it is clinically assessed as appropriate for the new mother, beyond September."

With one in five (20%) mothers and one in ten (10%) fathers experiencing perinatal anxiety and depression, Gidget Foundation Australia believes that specialist perinatal counselling is a key step on the road to recovery.

"When an expectant or new parent is experiencing those overwhelming feelings of anxiety or depression, sometimes a chat with the local GP just isn't enough. It's critical that when parents are in this fragile state, they're getting support from professionals who specialise in perinatal psychological support. Our Gidget Foundation team can not only offer hands-on, practical advice but also connect them with other local services or support groups," Gibson says.

Since May 2018, Gidget Foundation Australia's Start Talking telehealth program has been delivered into every state and territory in Australia. While regional and remote communities lack the proper resources to offer specialist face-to-face support, the program is just as essential for expectant and new parents living in major metro areas.

A common theme throughout the Start Talking evaluation was the convenience of the telehealth services and how much easier they were for our clients to engage in, Gibson explains.

"For families in both regional and metro areas, telehealth services performed higher than face-to-face in terms of wait times, frequency of appointments as well as seeing 15% more postpartum clients. We widely put this down to the fact that leaving the house can be difficult and quite stressful for new mums and dads," Gibson says.

One such parent that can speak to the benefits of the Start Talking telehealth program is Gidget Angel, Edwina Sharrock.

"Having a baby is a huge time of transition for new parents and for some people, leaving the house can feel overwhelming. The priority during this time should be on rest, recovery, establishing feeding and bonding with your new baby. The Start Talking telehealth services mean new mums don't have to travel far away from their support networks, worry about navigating traffic or finding a park – they can just focus on getting the support and love they need from their session. The closest Gidget House for me is over 500kms away, so telehealth was really the only option for me to connect with a perinatal specialist as we just don't have them in regional Australia," Sharrock said.

Given the proven clinical outcomes, Gidget Foundation Australia is urging the government to maintain the nationwide Medicare Benefits for telehealth to ensure vital services can continue to reach Australia's most vulnerable.

"It would be an absolute shame and true disservice to expectant and new parents to remove the expanded Medicare Benefits for telehealth services. While Gidget Foundation Australia will of course continue to provide our telehealth programs through philanthropic donations and fundraising, extended Medicare Benefits would enable us to expand our services and support more vulnerable families in need providing better outcomes for mums, dads and children across the country," Gibson says.

Ends.

About Gidget Foundation Australia

The Gidget Foundation Australia provides support for Perinatal Depression and Anxiety through support services for families suffering emotional distress during pregnancy and early parenting and education and awareness programs for health professionals and the community.

Their mission is to promote the importance of emotional wellbeing amongst expectant and new parents, their healthcare providers and the wider community to ensure that those in need receive timely, appropriate and supportive care.

About the Research & Citations

Gidget Foundation Australia commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) (Consulting) Australia to conduct an independent evaluation of the Start Talking program. The report draws on quantitative and qualitative data collected from Australians who had a Start Talking consultation between 1 January and 31 December 2019.

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