

Canine care for mental health patients, staff

Passive drug detector dogs are being introduced to NorthWestern Mental Health inpatient units.

Their introduction is part of a strategy to deter illicit substances from being brought into inpatient units to help keep people receiving treatment and staff safe.

NWMH is Victoria's largest mental health provider.

Executive Director Ruth Vine said the possession and use of illicit substances was a serious concern for all mental health services.

'There is considerable evidence that drug use can have a huge impact on vulnerable patients,' Associate Professor Vine said.

'We know that mental illness and drugs do not mix and it is our goal to keep drugs out of our units.

'When people with a mental illness are under the influence of illicit drugs, their level of aggression increases, it undermines their recovery and it adversely affects other consumers and staff who are exposed to this behaviour.

'The wellbeing and safety of our patients and staff is our highest priority and this initiative will help us offer a safe and supportive environment for those receiving treatment.'

Melbourne Health Chairman Robert Doyle said the initiative was a proactive response to a community-wide problem.

'Organisations across Victoria are facing the problem of illicit substances and State and Federal Governments

are investing millions of dollars to address the issue,' Mr Doyle said.

He said similar initiatives

using passive detector dogs had been successfully implemented by health services in the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

'We know from data in the UK and NZ that drug detection dogs act as a deterrent to bringing drugs into mental health facilities by patients and their visitors.

'And, in fact, experience from overseas shows us that these dogs can have a positive impact on our patients just with their presence in the units,' Mr Doyle said.

The dogs are trained to detect a range of illicit substances including marijuana, heroin, cocaine and ICE.

In the event that a substance is detected, the dog delivers a passive and non-intrusive response by sitting down.

'We have been working in consultation with people using our services, staff and union representatives over several months about the introduction of these dogs,' Associate Professor Vine said.

Other measures that have been introduced include:

- Ongoing education for staff;
- Additional signage;
- Improved storage for patient belongings;
- CCTV to better monitor entrances and exits.

The drug detection dogs will be implemented at all NWMH acute adult inpatient units.

Drug detector dog Jango with handler Elvis Arifovic and Emer Keaveney.

