

BACKGROUND

depressioNet, (dNet) a not-for-profit internet service, formed in June 2000 provides a comprehensive, independent resource for information, help and 24 hour peer based support for people whose lives are affected by depression, either directly or indirectly.

dNet, which operates with five fulltime staff and the commitment of a dedicated team of trained volunteers, offers a wealth of advice and information to its clients within the framework of a supportive and safe community environment.

Broad services include chat rooms, message boards, referral service for local services, up to the minute research and information and day-to-day alliances with industry and academics.

Depression is a growing concern that in Australia affects more than eight million adults and 95 000 children and adolescents.

Over 500,000 of these people will be women with prevalence peaking at 18 to 24 years. And significantly, one in five young people will experience depression in some form throughout their formative years.

Worldwide trends are more alarming. Statistics indicate that depression is increasing by 20% per year and the World Health Authority expects depression to be the second biggest world health concern by 2010.

By international standards, Australia spends a small proportion of its healthcare budget on mental health services (less than 7%) compared with more than 10%. The national budget was recently increased to include a \$1.9 billion announcement of mental health funding by the federal government.

- 12% in the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand.

Within this context, **dNet.com.au** provides an extensive 24 hour a day, seven day a week, online information and support service that includes: an online care team providing peer based advice and information in a safe and supportive environment; access to a personal referral service for those seeking professional treatment, and access to information, advice and statistics.

Since **dNet's** inception more than one million people have accessed the service and **dNet** regularly assists over 1000 active members on a weekly basis.

Key motivators for access to the service include: the need for information (64%), the need for treatment options and advice (34%), the need for support and group resources (29%), the need for answers to questions to help and support friends and family (48%) and the need for information to find out how other people are doing (39%).

While most of **dNet's** users have been diagnosed with depression, approximately 15% of people have not been formerly diagnosed. This statistic suggests two things, firstly – a significant proportion of people diagnosed with depression need access to a 24 hour support environment particularly as the need is highest during late evening when conventional services are closed; and secondly – an internet service provides anonymity, a significant consideration, for those who have not yet been diagnosed.

dNet data also shows that demand for the service is extensive, regular and ongoing with the average time being 30 minute contact a couple of times a week or more for a 6 – 12 month period.

Clients say **dNet** assists them to 'stay on track' because it is accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In other words, unlike conventional therapy and medical assistance, **dNet** is always there when people need it.

A fact confirmed by health professionals who increasingly recommend regular access to **dNet** to their clients and patients as part of their treatment.

And when people say 'they stay on track' what they might mean is that they manage to get through the daily grind by keeping up their work obligations, meeting study demands or continuing to manage and meet commitments to friends and family members.

For those diagnosed with depression and other mental illnesses this is vitally important as study, work, friends and family help keep people focussed and connected through everyday experiences, interactions and relationships – important ingredients for feelings of wellbeing and an enriched and rewarding life.

dNet is supported by health industry professionals and funded by the federal government – Department of Health and Ageing, MBF Living Well Foundation and through a variety of sponsors, donations and referral subscription fees.

FACT SHEET

- Since June 2000 more than a million people have visited depressionNet. Many of these people do so on a regular, ongoing basis.
 - The online community has registered 37,000 message board and chat room users since 2002 with over 1000 active members (at least weekly users) at any given time.
 - There has been a 20 % increase in registered users in 2005.
 - 31% of people who use depressionNet are referred to depressionNet by their healthcare professional.
 - 59% of respondents use depressionNet for more than six months, most of these having visit for longer than 12 months.
 - 22% of depressionNet visitors visit daily and at least 63% monthly.
 - 78% of depressionNet users agree and strongly agree that depressionNet helps them learn ways to help themselves.
 - 79% of users of depressionNet who are working state that depressionNet has helped them to be able to continue to work while having depression.
 - 75% of users of depressionNet who are working state that using depressionNet has helped them to improve their performance at work while having depression.
 - 28% of all users of depressionNet state that using depressionNet has helped them return / start to work.
 - 62% say it helps them to better manage their symptoms.
 - The average time that a person spends at depressionNet is over 30 minutes.
 - While most (84%) depressionNet users are diagnosed with depression, nearly 15% of users have no formal diagnosis.
 - 42% of users have other physical or mental illnesses.
 - The main uses of depressionNet:
 - 64% looking for information
 - 38% for treatment
 - 29% are looking for support group resources
 - 48% to ask questions, seek help/support from others
 - 39% to find out how others are doing
 - Using depressionNet allows 87% of users to understand they are not alone
- 2005 depressionNet User Survey

INDUSTRY FACTS

- Approximately one in five young people in Australia will experience depression.
- When asked, young people gave the following reasons why they don't seek help for their mental health problems:
 - Prefer to manage their own problems (38%)
 - Don't know where to get help (17%),
 - Worried about what other people would think (14%)— www.beyondblue.org.au

- The Internet can reach a mass audience: The Internet offers the opportunity for widely available, updatable, 24-hour, self-paced access to CBT. Recent Australian Bureau of Statistics figures indicate that 56% of Australian homes have access to a computer and that 37% (2.7 million) have access to the Internet.⁸ Healthcare is one of the most common reasons for using the Internet.⁹
- Internet-based interventions are likely to be cost-effective Computer-assisted assessment is cheaper and more efficient than clinical interviews
- The Internet is capable of supporting individually tailored prevention programs:
- The Internet is capable of supporting automated applications that guarantee intervention fidelity
- The Internet provides a convenient platform for delivering booster sessions
- Because of its anonymity, users may prefer the Internet to other methods of delivering mental health programs:
- The Internet can facilitate the refinement and appropriate targeting of prevention programs:
- The delivery of Internet programs can be informed and improved by medical informatics research.

— *Preventing Depression: The prevention of depression using the Internet*
Helen Christensen and Kathleen M Griffiths - Australian National
University. *MJA* 2002 177 (7): S122-S125

- Each year, more than 800 000 adults¹ and 95 000 children and adolescents² are affected by depression. Over 500,000 of these people will be women, with prevalence peaking at age 18 to 24.
- By international standards, Australia spends a small proportion of its healthcare budget on mental health services (less than 7%), compared with more than 10%–12% in the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand.⁶

— *Preventing depression: a challenge for the Australian community:* Ian B
Hickie *MJA* 2002 177 (7): S85-S86



- by 2020, it is estimated depression will be the second most pervasive health problem worldwide.
- "Some one in five Australians today have a mental illness, with young men aged 18 - 24 and middle-aged women presenting the highest prevalence.
- almost 80 per cent of people with depression also experience anxiety, a physical ailment, and alcohol or other drug misuse

— *Department of Health and Ageing: Depression - The ailment of the 21st Century*