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Title

Diverse and vulnerable: experiences of private allied health practices managing through the COVID-19 pandemic

Priority 1 (Research Category)

Qualitative research

Presenters

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Abstract

Context: The majority of allied health services in Australia are delivered by small private practices in the primary care setting with limited government funding. During the initial lockdowns to reduce transmission of COVID-19, these practices were subject to the same health orders as other private business with only 'essential services' permitted to remain open.

Objective: To understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and associated public health measures, on the financial viability of private allied health practices.

Study design and analysis: Thirteen semi-structured interviews with allied health practice owners and managers in Sydney. Data were analysed thematically.

Setting and population: Allied health practice owners and managers operating in private practice in Sydney. Purposive sampling to mix of allied health practices offering physical and mental health therapies.

Results: All of the interviewees reported experiencing the stress of balancing precarious finances caused by reduced and/or fluctuating patient demand. Patients' reluctance to seek care was compounded by ambiguity around whether allied health services were 'essential'. Manual therapies were particularly vulnerable to financial stress because their capacity to transition to telehealth and access to government funding were limited. Conversely, psychologists reported demand for their services exceeded what they could provide.

Conclusions: The findings are indicative of allied health's peripheral status in Australia's primary care landscape. Greater priority to the funding and integration of allied health is needed in primary care policy.