

## Professor Sunil Bhar



Professor Sunil Bhar, is a clinical psychologist and Director of the Wellbeing Clinic for Older Adults – Swinburne University’s mental health counselling clinic for older people living in residential aged care homes. He leads an active research lab focusing on the emotional wellbeing of older adults. Professor Bhar’s research focusses on the application of reminiscence and cognitive-behavioural therapies for older people living with depression, anxiety or dementia. He has won over \$3 million in research grants to examine the wellbeing of older adults living in residential aged care settings. In recognition of Professor Bhar’s expertise in late life mental health, he was awarded the Alastair Heron Prize in Ageing by the National College of Clinical Psychologists.

### **About the National Telehealth Counselling and Support Services for residential aged care communities project:**

Last year, the team at Swinburne’s Wellbeing Clinic for Older Adults volunteered their time and expertise to develop the free National Telehealth Counselling and Support Service in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The telehealth program was established to provide a free counselling service to help the vulnerable and highly impacted residential aged care community cope with mental health issues such as depression, loneliness, anxiety, and stress, all of which were exacerbated by the pandemic and restrictions. The service takes a novel, systemic approach by supporting aged care residents as well as their families and the workers who provide their care. A forgotten statistic is two thirds of aged care residents are women, and most carers and aged care workers are women.

Up to 60% of aged-care residents have at least one mental health disorder, such as depression and anxiety disorders. Yet, less than 4% of residents have access to government-funded psychological services through local primary health networks (PHNs). Medicare Benefits Schedule rebates for psychological treatments are also available to residents; however, there is a significant shortage of psychologists trained to provide services to older adults.

A critical, future-focused feature of the Telehealth program is it’s delivery by postgraduate psychology, counselling and social work students from around Australia under the supervision of experienced clinicians. Geriatric psychology has traditionally not been a career path of choice for psychology graduates. By offering this unique training placement opportunity, Swinburne is developing the workforce of the future with the passion, expertise and compassion to care for the mental health of older Australians.

The Telehealth service has been highly successful. Demand outstripped supply and due to funding limitations, we have had to minimise promotion of the service. Despite this, in the period 15 May 2020 to 22 May 2021, we received 295 referrals from 90 aged care facilities nationally and we have provided 1,531 counselling sessions to clients. The service was recognised for its innovation and excellence by the sector and peers by being awarded a prestigious HESTA Excellence Award and Swinburne’s Vice Chancellor Community Engagement Award 2020.

Complex problems of mental health and loneliness in the aged will not abate as the COVID-19 pandemic passes. They will continue to grow at an increasing rate as Australia’s population ages. With four million people reaching the ages of 65–84 years by 2022 and rapid acceleration over the following ten years, the time to act is now. Travel to receive counselling and support will remain prohibitive for the large majority of vulnerable older Australians, particularly those living in rural and regional Australia and the sector is unable to make adequate supports available.

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety and the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System, highlighted that our vulnerable older population is caught between two broken systems.

In response to the recent Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, the 2021 Federal budget focused on improvements to the aged-care sector, but no funding was specified to address mental health needs of aged-care residents, their families or staff.

The Telehealth service is a catalytic program that blends the best of 11 years expertise in geriatric counselling with new technology to deliver mental health counselling at scale.