

Australia's doctors to examine addiction in wake of COVID-19 pandemic at IMiA21 conference

GPs from across Australia and the world will come together in February to look at addiction amidst the COVID-19 pandemic at the International Medicine in Addiction Conference (IMiA21).

The IMiA21 Conference runs every two years in partnership with the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP), the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP).

This year's conference, from 26 to 28 February, focuses on the need for clinicians to respond to a patient's unique situation and experience.

It is timely, with GPs seeing an increase in patients presenting with alcohol and other drug concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A May [study by the Australian National University](#) found Australians were drinking alcohol more frequently during the pandemic, while [the ADAPT Study](#) found those who use illicit drugs reported consuming more cannabis (57%) and alcohol (47%), but less for other drugs.

IMiA21, the fifth conference, is being convened by the RACGP. This year's conference will be fully digital, enabling doctors from around Australia and the world to attend. The program and registration for GPs is now online: <https://imia21.com.au/program.php#program>

International keynote speakers include UK-based Sam Chamberlain on behavioural addictions, UK-based Owen Bowden-Jones on party drugs and 'chem sex', and US-based Shelly Greenfield on gender differences in substance use disorders.

RACGP spokesperson and IMiA21 convenor Dr Hester Wilson said the conference was a timely opportunity for GPs, psychiatrists and addiction specialists.

"We don't have a full picture of the impact of the pandemic but we do know anecdotally that GPs, addiction specialists and psychiatrists are seeing more patients presenting with alcohol and other drug concerns.

"Alcohol became a big issue during the pandemic, building up in March when restrictions came into force and people started working from home, were under stress and started drinking more frequently than usual. Some had problems before and relapsed, but others found themselves drinking a bottle of wine a day for the first time. We also saw family members coming in with concerns about the substance use of adult children who had been forced to return to live at home in the pandemic.

"On the other hand however, there were patients who reported positive experiences during the pandemic, such as that the restrictions gave them a chance to rest and recuperate, so the impact has been mixed."

Dr Wilson said the conference was also a chance for clinicians to reflect on lessons learned from the pandemic, and positive changes in healthcare delivery.

"The COVID-19 virus forced GPs and other clinicians to adapt in order to continue providing care to our patients.

"Medicare-subsidised telehealth has been critical in ensuring continued access to care for patients, and in practice we've found that it is fantastic, particularly for patients going through alcohol detox."

"Last year was a gruelling year for GPs and other frontline health professionals in Australia and worldwide. IMiA21 is a chance for us to connect with colleagues, reflect on what we've learned, celebrate the good work we are doing and be inspired and reinvigorated so we can keep on caring for the communities we work with."

RANZCP President, Associate Professor John Allan said that the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more important than ever to be aware of the dangers of alcohol use for our mental health and wellbeing.

"In times of stress we can find ourselves drinking more often and more heavily because we think it will help us to feel relaxed, even calmer, but alcohol use can make matters much worse and have a detrimental impact on our mental health."

"There is an under-recognition of the prevalence and size of this problem, its impact on peoples' lives across the life span, and the burden of disease on the health system and the community."

"The IMiA 2021 Conference will provide an opportunity for clinicians who are all involved in the treatment of these issues to come together and learn from each other on how we have met the unprecedented challenges that 2020 brought.

Prof Nick Lintzeris, President of the Australasian Chapter of Addiction Medicine, Royal Australasian College of Physicians said:

"The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for our health system.

"One of the unique impacts has been on patients who are experiencing alcohol and drug problems and how we, as physicians, adapt our practices to support them.

"We have seen that the societal changes in response to COVID did result in some people adopting new and concerning drinking patterns, or even people with past addictions relapsing. The impact on face-to-face rehabilitation support for recovering patients has also been significant.

"The International Medicine in Addiction Conference is a good opportunity for addiction medicine physicians and experts to come together and share our learnings from the pandemic so far, so that we can incorporate them into our practice and improve patient care."

~ENDS

RACGP spokesperson Dr Hester Wilson and other spokespeople are available for interview.

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About the RACGP

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) was established in 1958 and is Australia's peak general practice representative organisation.

The RACGP has more than 41,000 members working in or towards a career in general practice, more than 9,500 of them live and work in rural and remote areas of the country. Nine in every 10 GPs are with the RACGP.

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