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PROJECT SYNERGY: DIGITALLY ENHANCED MENTAL HEALTH CARE

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A NEW online platform has been developed to “assist the assessment, feedback, management and monitoring of those with mental disorders” with a view to enhancing the quality of mental health care provided by traditional face-to-face services, according to the authors of a Supplement published by the *Medical Journal of Australia* today.

Project Synergy: co-designing technology-enabled solutions for Australian mental health services reform is a seven-part summary of the platform which has been developed by an international team led by Professor Ian Hickie from the Brain and Mind Centre at the University of Sydney.

According to the developers, the online platform “does not provide stand-alone medical or health advice, risk assessment, clinical diagnosis or treatment; instead, it supports users to decide what may be suitable care options” for them.

Project Synergy has been tested in several populations, with four case studies presented in the MJA Supplement:

- those attending university;
- those in three disadvantaged communities in NSW;
- those at risk of suicide; and,
- those attending five headspace centres.

In an accompanying editorial published in the MJA itself, Professor Hickie wrote that:

“Given the rapid spread of health information technologies and the unmet demand for mental health services, extensive deployment of digitally enhanced care is now inevitable.

“People expect access to digital tools that support greater choice, convenience, lower cost and higher quality care. However, given the broader socio-political concerns about the impacts of health information technologies, those engaged in this deployment will need to answer substantive ethical, legal and funding questions.

“Digital tools, combined with new personal sensors and monitoring technologies, can underpin clinical assessment, objective testing, initiation of treatments or collection of additional information from family or supportive others.”

Project Synergy, he wrote, was funded by the Australian Government.

“These studies [four of which are described in the Supplement] highlight both the potential for real change but also the challenges that emerge (eg, ethical, legal, funding, telecommunications infrastructure) in moving to contemporary technology-enhanced service environments.”

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