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Media Release

Telehealth for new and expectant parents to stay for good.

- Gidget Foundation Australia welcomes the Australian Government’s commitment to permanent funding for telehealth to support vulnerable expectant and new parents allowing them to *Stay Connected with Telehealth for GOOD*
- National access to telehealth has been one of the great successes of the Australian Government’s response to the pandemic
- Independent research reveals telehealth services have delivered equal, if not better results, on clinical screening measures for depression and anxiety

Today, Gidget Foundation Australia (GFA) welcomes the announcement from the Commonwealth Government who have committed to continue the Medicare-rebated telehealth services a permanent pillar of the Australian health system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen Australian healthcare providers turn to telehealth solutions to deliver vital services to those in need. Since the COVID-19 telehealth response commenced in March 2020, 758 families have been supported via 4,760 appointments through GFA’s *national Start Talking* telehealth program. Demand for this service in 2021 increased by 74% compared to the previous year.

Today’s announcement from The Hon. Greg Hunt, Minister for Health and Ageing that the Better Access program with 20 sessions will continue for another 12 months means that the 100,000 expectant and new parents who experience postnatal depression and anxiety or mood adjustment disorders every year in Australia, will continue to have access to telehealth mental health services, when and where they need it.

Gidget Foundation Australia’s Clinical Team Leader, Chris Barnes, says, telehealth service delivery has become the ‘new normal’ during COVID-19 and is a natural extension of traditional healthcare delivery, however, for vulnerable parents in distress, access to telehealth is even more important.

“Factors such as birth trauma, inability to drive to appointments resulting from surgery, geographical distance as well as lack of available specialist services particularly in rural and remote areas, all mean that telehealth meets a much-needed service gap for vulnerable parents, and we are grateful that the Government has recognised this today.”

When presented with the choice of either face-to-face or telehealth, nearly three-quarters of Gidget Foundation Australia clients (70%) choose telehealth.

Sally Stenhouse reached out to the Foundation during the pandemic following the birth of her first child Jonah, but the wait time for her closest face-to-face service was too long. When she was offered access to the *Start Talking* telehealth program due to the pandemic funding, Sally felt instant relief. Just knowing she had an appointment to speak with a specialist perinatal mental health professional through Gidget Foundation Australia provided immediate comfort.

“I fell straight in love with Jonah when he was born, but what I couldn’t control was the grief of struggling to breastfeed and watching my baby scream out as he was so hungry. I had shame and regret of letting my husband control so many different aspects around Jonah’s feeding, and then he left us. I needed somewhere to unpack it.”

“Speaking to my Gidget Clinician was lifesaving. I was able to have my appointment anywhere. I didn’t need to put Jonah in the car or work around his sleeping to attend. Once, I even visited a friend who looked after Jonah for me

whilst I had my appointment, then we went back to chatting when it was done. I don't know where I would be today without Gidget," says Sally.

Gidget Foundation Australia will continue to deliver a blend of telehealth and face-to-face appointments through clinical treatment programs nationally. These programs currently offer expectant and new parents 20 appointments per calendar year under Medicare's Better Access Initiative.

An independent evaluation conducted by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC) on the Foundation's telehealth program, revealed that the service delivers perinatal psychological treatment with equal to, if not improved results, on clinical screening measures compared with face-to-face.

CEO of Gidget Foundation Australia, Arabella Gibson, said the independent evaluation was conducted to assess the effectiveness, overall access, and wellbeing benefits of both the telehealth and face-to-face counselling services Gidget Foundation Australia offers.

"During the height of the pandemic there was a huge shift in the way our health systems operated as a whole, and we found our clients, preferred the flexibility of telehealth. This is an essential advancement in how people can access treatment. Since the pandemic, GFA have seen an increase in the number of appointments clients are requiring for treatment and welcome news that the Government will continue offering 20 Medicare rebated psychological appointments per calendar year. To support the increase in demand for perinatal mental health services there also needs to be a strong investment in workforce expansion or the development of alternate workforce options," Gibson says.

With one in five (20%) mothers and one in ten (10%) fathers experiencing perinatal depression and anxiety, Gidget Foundation Australia believes that specialist perinatal counselling is an essential step on the road to recovery.

"When an expectant or new parent is experiencing those overwhelming feelings of anxiety or depression, sometimes a chat with the local GP just isn't enough. It's critical that when parents are in this fragile state, they're getting support from professionals who specialise in perinatal psychological support. Our Gidget Foundation Australia clinical team offer therapy and practical advice, but also connect vulnerable parents with other local services or support groups," Gibson says.

Since May 2018, Gidget Foundation Australia's *Start Talking telehealth* program has been delivered into every state and territory in Australia and now has 28 dedicated Clinicians for this service. While regional and remote communities lack the proper resources to offer specialist face-to-face support, the program is just as essential for expectant and new parents living in major metro areas.

A common theme throughout the Start Talking evaluation conducted by PwC was the convenience of the telehealth services and how much easier they were for clients to engage in, Gibson explained.

"For families in both regional and metro areas, telehealth services performed higher than face-to-face in terms of wait times, frequency of appointments as well as seeing 15% more postpartum clients. We put this down to the fact that leaving the house can be difficult and quite stressful for new mums and dads," Gibson said.

Gidget Foundation Australia telehealth client and new mother, Kate Brow, said, "Mothers are told 'if you don't look after yourself, you can't look after your children', but with a young baby and toddler it often feels impossible to make time for yourself. Telehealth services are a game-changer because you don't have to pack your baby into the car, wait in line and then sit down with a (most likely screaming) baby while you try to discuss your feelings in front of the baby you love. Being able to access psychological support in my own home while my baby sleeps has allowed me to focus on my mental health before it reached a crisis point."

The benefits of today's telehealth extension announcement for expectant and new parents are significant:

- Telehealth increases accessibility, allowing more Australians to continue, or return, to treatment services.
- Telehealth services are cost effective, often with no out of pocket expenses (such as GFA's programs).
- Telehealth increases access for those people with pre-existing mental health conditions that make attendance in person difficult.
- Telehealth increases accessibility for new parents with newborns and particularly multiples who find it difficult to attend appointments in person around baby's needs.
- Telehealth allows carers to attend without being absent from the home for periods of time.
- Telehealth reduces the risk of physical injury in vulnerable parents after recent surgery (such as caesarean).
- Telehealth allows people to access treatment outside of their local geographical area that can often have long wait times, therefore enabling quicker access and aiding in early intervention.
- Telehealth facilitates access to perinatal mental health specialists who are experienced in treating perinatal mental health concerns.

Gidget Foundation Australia has delivered 74% more telehealth appointments in 2021 than in 2020, this is in addition to the 63% increase in treatment services in 2020 than the prior year, before the pandemic. The Foundation has delivered 71% more consultations to vulnerable families year-to-date on the prior year – which was already significantly up on pre-pandemic figures.

“Telehealth can be the difference between getting support and not. We are thrilled that Australians now have a permanent option of long-term assurance for vulnerable Australian parents. People under stress need certainty when it comes to getting help with their emotional wellbeing. Gidget Foundation Australia is here to help all Australians and we are here to make a difference,” Gibson added.

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About Gidget Foundation Australia

Gidget Foundation Australia provides support for perinatal depression and anxiety through support services for families suffering emotional distress during pregnancy and early parenting and education and awareness programs for health professionals and the community.

Their mission is to support the emotional wellbeing of expectant and new parents to ensure they receive timely, appropriate and specialist care.

About the Research & Citations

Gidget Foundation Australia commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) (Consulting) Australia to conduct an independent evaluation of the Start Talking program. The report draws on quantitative and qualitative data collected from Australians who had a Start Talking consultation between 1 January and 31 December 2019.

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