

## **What can we learn from across the water? An international fellowship in functional and somatic conditions in children and adolescents**

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### **Background:**

In 2023, the author completed a Winston Churchill Fellowship (a program that provides an opportunity to Australians to travel overseas to conduct research in their chosen field) in functional and somatic conditions in young people. The Fellowship aimed to understand how we can bridge the gaps in care in Australia by drawing upon the knowledge of global expert clinicians and researchers who have contributed to our current understanding of functional and somatic conditions (including Functional Neurological Disorder) and by exploring international care models of care. This involved travelling to institutions across Denmark, Poland, United Kingdom, the USA, and Canada.

### **Approach:**

The Fellowship identified the following across the services visited:

- Shared components within models of care
- Novel interventions and approaches such as the use of virtual reality for physical therapies
- Shared experiences and observed patterns of patient presentations in the area of functional and somatic conditions

### **Outcome:**

Key observations and findings include:

- Integration of traditionally fragmented structures is needed to support FSS through a whole system (biopsychosocial) mind-body approach
- Flexible shared and stepped service models provide the opportunity for enhance care for the full spectrum of FSS
- Continued development of education and training programs is essential to de-stigmatise and build awareness of FSS
- Strengthening national and international partnerships is vital for a unified approach to FSS, including finding a common language
- Sustainable investment in clinical services, education, and research is necessary to advance our understanding of best practice for FSS
- For truly impactful change, attention is required at governmental, healthcare, education, and individual patient levels

Based on the key observations and findings, the following recommendations were developed:

- Education and upskilling
- Dedicated and sustainable funding
- Mind-Body services and pathways
- Standardised and stepped-care approaches
- Protection and support for the workforce

### **Innovation and Significance:**

The outlined Fellowship is the first in Australia to focus on functional and somatic conditions in young people, with a lens on the full spectrum of FSS including co-morbid conditions. The recommendations developed are specifically for the Australian context, are aimed at governmental, healthcare, education, and individual patient levels.