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Rehab clinics overwhelmed as waiting lists balloon during pandemic

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By [Caitlin Fitzsimmons](#)
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Drug and alcohol rehab centres across NSW have been overwhelmed amid the COVID-19 pandemic, with waiting lists doubling at some clinics and delays of up to six weeks for outpatient counselling.

Many Sydneysiders are heading up to northern NSW to dry out, while others are undertaking day programs from their living rooms via Zoom.



Enquiries for treatment for alcohol and drug addiction have spiked during the pandemic. iStock

The Sydney Clinic in Bronte, South Pacific Private on the northern beaches and The Buttery near Byron Bay are among those reporting ballooning waiting lists since the onset of COVID-19.

As well as drugs and alcohol, clinics report that patients are seeking treatment for sex addiction, compulsive gambling and general mental illness in higher numbers.

The Buttery's chief executive Leone Crayden said there was high demand for the centre's substance abuse and gambling addiction programs.

"People are ringing and they're more anxious than they were before," Ms Crayden said. "People are talking about how they're drinking earlier, because they're not working or working from home."

There are 72 people on the waiting list for The Buttery's public residential program, compared to 20-40 before the pandemic. Ms Crayden said that meant the difference between waiting a month or two and waiting up to six months.

The Buttery also had a six-week waiting list for out-patient counselling services in the community where it previously had none. "It's a really long time when you've made the decision to change and you're motivated, that's when you need for people to come in," Ms Crayden said.

The public clinic was running at half capacity because the double rooms in the old butter factory could only have one occupant.

Lynne Fishwick, chief executive of South Pacific Private at Curl Curl beach, said there had been at least a 25 per cent increase in inquiries for in-patient admissions, while the clinic had to reduce capacity by about 10 per cent to comply with social distancing requirements.

As a result, the waiting list had grown from a handful of people to several dozen since the start of the pandemic.

Sex addiction was a big problem during the pandemic, along with other addictions and general depression and anxiety, Ms Fishwick said.

"The isolation is exacerbating a lot of symptoms. A lot of people working from home are finding it quite challenging and the uncertainty is something that people are finding very challenging."

Elma Fourie, general manager at the Sydney Clinic in Bronte, said there had been a substantial increase in demand, with COVID-19 stress and isolation taking a toll on people's mental health.

"Local demand for our services has been high for quite some time now, and this has increased during the COVID pandemic, and means there is a waiting list for our services," Ms Fourie said.

The Sydney Clinic also had to reduce bed availability because there were normally some shared rooms.

Ms Fourie said the waiting list for residential programs was between two and five people before the pandemic and had grown to 15-25 and that was across both mental health and substance abuse.

St John of God Health Care chief executive Colman O'Driscoll said its mental health hospitals in Burwood and Richmond had "steady demand" and there was no waiting list.

Many services were offering remote therapy through platforms such as Zoom for out-patients attending half or full-day sessions.

A NSW Health spokesperson said the government will invest more than \$250 million in alcohol and other drug treatment services in 2020-21.

"Access to alcohol and other drug treatment services has been maintained during COVID-19 and there is no evidence to suggest otherwise," the spokesperson said.

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