

# Start ups aiming high

## Rural Health connect takes off

BY NICHOLAS NAKOS

**M**EGAN Gomez's observations as a journalist across regional and rural Australia illuminated some harsh truths.

"I spent a lot of time reporting on drought, natural disasters, bushfires and isolation," Ms Gomez said.

"When you're going into the homes of people, you can see the impact of these first hand and just how far people are from a town and how difficult it is for them to access professional help," she said.

That's when Rural Health Connect, a mental health service that can be accessed by regional and rural Australians from their own home was conceived.

Growing up in Gippsland and working in the region, before a stint in central Queensland, Ms Gomez has been gradually developing the online platform, which launched in September, after months of toil.

"The platform links people to psychologists," Ms Gomez said.

"People log on, search for the psychologist they want to see, book the appointment and are seen via a secure, encrypted video platform," she said.

Some of the 15 psychologists currently on the program offer bulk billing, for people living in areas classified as rural, such as Elmore, Inglewood, Maldon



Bendigo Health director of research and innovation, Dr Angela Crombie.

Gomez said.

Bendigo Health's director of research and innovation, Dr Angela Crombie, said she hopes that regional and Victorian start ups will be supported as part of the 2020 Bendigo Health Accelerator program.

"There is no other regional health accelerator program, so we are excited to bring the brightest minds to Bendigo," Dr Crombie said.

She said Bendigo Health's 12-week program give start up health businesses access to regional communities and clinical fellows, highlighting the areas of aged care and digital technology as areas of intrigue and interest.

The Melbourne Health Accelerator will serve as a model for Bendigo Health and have conducted the program since 2016.

Its 2019 class included the company CoRoster, who specialise in a workplace planning tool that fairly allocates shifts and reduces burnout and staff turnover in high pressure environments like healthcare and emergency services.

"At Bendigo Health, we are looking for a range of start ups, including products that support health care and health services, such as rostering, support services, IT and finance," Dr Crombie said.

"We have about 20 staff from Bendigo Health and the region who have put their hands up to be innovation fellows," Dr Crombie said.

"They will help broker relationships between the clinical environment and the start up," she said.

Expressions of interest for start ups looking to take part in the program will be released soon, with the program slated to commence in May, 2020.



Rural Health Connect founder Megan Gomez.

and Heathcote.

With demand for psychology services exceeding supply nationwide, Ms Gomez's entry into the field has been welcomed by those in the industry.

"Because the need and demand is so great, I'm not experiencing any resistance from providers," Ms Gomez said.

"I think it's more of a relief that there is a solution for people in rural areas."

Rural Health Connect's

growth and market readiness was aided by Ms Gomez's participation in Melbourne Health's recent Accelerator program.

The program, headquartered at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, sought to bridge the gap between entrepreneurial spirit and drive the complex problems encountered within the health care system.

It provided Ms Gomez with the opportunity to access the health system,



"It's about being there, being visible for long enough for people to think about us when they have a hard time, and know we exist."

**Megan Gomez, Rural Health Connect founder.**

connect with researchers and build relationships to help her social enterprise flourish.

Ms Gomez is one of the program's success stories and will be acting as a mentor during the Bendigo Health Accelerator, commencing next year.

As Bendigo's start up in residence, Ms Gomez will be offering advice to those participating in what will be the first regional health accelerator program in Victoria.

"Accelerators are crash courses in running businesses in the area of health," Ms Gomez said.

"You learn basic business planning and development skills, ways to stay motivated, public speaking skills and how to pitch to investors," she said.

The accelerator program has produced many success stories, with research projects launched and investments secured for many who took part.

Ms Gomez's next step in growing Rural Health Connect is to get the message to the masses.

"It's about being there, being visible for long enough for people to think about us when they have a hard time, and know we exist," Ms

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