

DR GEOFF HATTEN
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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Re: Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

Dear Senate Committee Members

My concerns relate to two areas of the Senate Committee's inquiry: Section b) part (iv) – Changes to the number of allied mental health treatment services for patients under the Medicare Benefits Schedule; and Section e) part (i) – mental health workforce issues, including the two- tiered Medicare rebate system for psychologists

Firstly, in the context of serious mental illness/psychological disorder and associated behavioural and emotional dysfunction, a reduction to six plus four sessions would most often be inadequate to effectively assess and provide the necessary treatment. Also those with severe conditions are usually those who are least able to afford any extra sessions out of their own pockets. Consequently I would professionally and ethically have to ascertain a potential client's ability to pay for extra sessions, as accepting referrals from those unable to pay for treatment beyond the planned six plus four sessions might mean having to discharge before treatment is complete. I also am aware, having worked in various public mental health contexts that waiting lists are long and appropriately trained clinicians are not always available to provide the appropriate psychological treatments. We do not limit the number of sessions for persons with physical medical conditions such as heart disease or diabetes so why is there a proposal to limit services for persons with psychological illness?

Secondly, I am very concerned about any plan to do away with the distinction between a Clinical Psychologist (six years or more university training) and Psychologist (four year university trained) with an associated reduction in Medicare rebate. I am a Clinical Psychologist in Public and private practice treating vulnerable families with children with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties and/or developmental delays. I have Doctoral level training in Clinical Psychology which I earned through seven years of under and postgraduate university training that comprised coursework, research, and over 2,000 hours of supervised clinical training in various hospital and child and adult mental health settings. In these settings I worked alongside medical and other mental and physical health specialities. I have been intensively trained and tested in assessing adult and child mental illness and in the delivery of evidence based psychological treatments. Importantly I have also been trained to be aware of the limits of my expertise and when it is best to decline or to refer on a client.

Contrasting this Psychologists receive four years university training which may or may not comprise any training to assess and treat mental illness and whose supervised experience may be in a narrow clinical area or in an area that does not relate to psychological disorder (e.g. organisational psychology). Doctoral level training is the standard for independent psychological practice in most developed countries while Australia, in allowing persons with only four years of university training to independently practice psychology, positions itself as the having the lowest psychological qualifications in the western world. To do away with differential rebates will discourage clinical training and keep standards of practice in Australia below those in comparable countries.

I urge the Committee to retain the current six plus six Medicare rebated sessions (plus another six in exceptional circumstances) to ensure those Australians most in need can access psychological services in sufficient number to benefit from them. I also ask that the specialised training of the Clinical Psychologist be recognised and appropriately utilised by retaining the two-tier Medicare rebate system. This would allow those Australians in most need of specialist clinical services to identify and access those specifically trained to assess and treat their disorders.

Sincerely

Dr Geoff Hatten