

Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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Firstly I would like to thank you for taking the time to review this serious matter and for listening to my voice. I would like to convey my astonishment at the Gillard Government's rationalisation of a service that reaches those suffering from poor mental health within all regions of Australia. I feel compelled to provide an abbreviated version of the history surrounding my mental health issues to hopefully highlight just how important and significant this small rebate is to ordinary Australians. I sincerely wish you good luck with this difficult process.

During May of 1994 I was minding my own business and attempting to get ahead in life by living it in the best way I knew how. I was employed in a prominent security company in an affluent area of Sydney servicing celebrities, media families, politicians, prominent businesses and governmental buildings. I had been working within this industry for quite some time prior to this job. I had faced many and varied situations and had to defend myself against attacks in the past all without too much damage either to my person or psyche. I was in my early 20's and fit with it. During my shift my partner and I responded to an alarm and attended a jewellery store break and enter, one thing led to another and the end result was me being stabbed 28 times (predominantly in the upper torso, neck, face and arm). Not the end to the shift I was hoping for. I even missed out on my morning coffee.

Were it not for the fantastic help of the ambulance officers (there were 4 paramedics who no doubt sufferers of PTSD themselves now- sorry for my part guys) and their "jumper leads" and the incredible follow up from the staff and many Doctors/ Surgeons at St Vincent's, I would not be here now telling you this. As you may imagine it took a while for the physical to heal and included follow-up surgery. When the dust settled on the physical I noticed that I was broken in other ways that I had never imagined before. I could no longer feel safe ANYWHERE, I could no longer sleep ANYTIME, I could no longer feel ANYTHING except a burning seething rage. I was then treated to the special benefits of our declining legal system (a good friend of mine left me with this great quote "There is a huge discrepancy between the law and justice" truer words I have yet to hear) as if I wasn't damaged enough beforehand. Not only did I have to face the person who had put me here (I arrested one and fended off the other, I even recovered all reported \$1.2 million worth of the stolen jewellery). The trial proceeded and I was accused by the legal fraternity, of being responsible for my own stabbing. This is an abbreviated version of events that took years to get through and eventually ended in a disappointing manner that we shall call "the law being done"

I fortunately have a loving wife who got me to see a social worker at the local community health (I had returned to a rural setting) who, after a couple of appointments, knew that she did not possess the skills required to assist me and referred me to a psychologist for which I am truly grateful. I was diagnosed with chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. My Psychologist worked with me for a few months and as PTSD was still in its relative infancy within Australia came to know of a program that had some of the world leaders in this field of research that I was able to access. At the time it was primarily set up as a veterans program yet ultimately I was accepted by all as we all suffered the same just through different journeys. I was no longer Robinson Crusoe. I had found a group of people that were each suffering their own ordeal however we all did it in the same way.

My life was in chaos, my relationship had become incredibly strained, I had cut off most of my support networks and was busily closing down what remained of my former life. I used to wake up in a ball of sweat, every muscle tense and aching, my self care went off the radar, I had flashbacks of breathing through parts of my body that no one should ever breathe through. I can still feel the knife going through my left arm (near my wrist) where it proceeded to cut all but two tendons. (I kid myself that I am well enough yet as I write this I have tears literally streaming down my face. There goes my tough guy image.) I had flashbacks of having my hand inside my back. I can still see the look of absolute horror upon the face of my work colleague. I remember dying right there on the street. I remember being given the last rites in hospital. My life was forever changed and not in a good way. Who was this person? Where did I go? After all I was “ten feet tall and bullet proof” this stuff happens to other people, not me.

From this point my usual routine was get up at 8:30am to 10am- ish and have LOTS of coffee (around 12-15 Jugs of percolated swamp water), progress to sit and vegetate like a zombie for hours on end, my wife would sometimes come home (she has since admitted that she would take a deep breath when entering the house, fearing what she would find) snapping me out of my funk. Sometimes she would try to get me out of the house and suggest that we go to the local café, as non-threatening as that sounds now, I used that opportunity to start an argument so I wouldn't be asked to go. I used the same technique to discourage most social activity. What a peach to live with.

After a brief round of arguments I would relapse into a coma until dark when once again my long suffering wife would brave the cold frozen tundra that I had become. I was emotionally numb. I would have just wasted the day and done nothing to contribute at all- my wife deserved to be treated so much better than this. Truly a low point of life, period. I would then sometimes take care of the cooking, frozen pies and oven fried chips. What culinary delight. I know you must be hungry just thinking about this. My life and that of my wife's had become truly joyless existences. With dinner finally over I would retire to the outside verandah and commence my drinking of sometimes a carton of beer (great for my liver that

had been extensively “sliced, diced and moulid”) or other such beverages- either way lots of alcohol in an effort to stop the intrusive memories and wind me down enough to be able to sleep, and would eventually retire to bed as the sun was rising- you know, the safe time. I would inevitably wake with another horrific nightmare. Day completed. Over this time I treated my wife like crap and she stood by me even though to this day I did not deserve her loyalty nor had I earned it. I have so many regrets and sorrows for that time. I was as low as a person can get and still be here. I was wracked with physical pain at the same time and I found that I had the constitution of a bull elephant as I could take handfuls of pain eliminating medication and it did not “touch the sides” of my pain levels. I even mistreated my beautiful dog of which I still hold massive regret and guilt. (Since treatment I am truly transformed in this regard, I now have 4 death row refugees who all live pampered- but not spoiled- and balanced lives) I hated myself and made sure I persuaded as many people as possible to do likewise. I was putrid.

Every time I thought that I could successfully suppress this matter another court case or specialist appointment to attend that would rake it over and bring it back to the surface. Throughout the passing years of ongoing therapy I was finally able to rejoin the workforce (though I was told that this would be unlikely) and became a productive (financially as well as otherwise) member of society once more. Over time I have made many breakthroughs in my life and whilst I am functional again I still have lots of residue. During my darkest time I contemplated both suicide and homicide yet therapy got me past this and from time to time I still need a “tune-up,” which can take some time to stop me from deteriorating, destroying the one great relationship I have and generally keep me running. (This tune-up timeframe duration is not one that can be predicted as I am not a piece of Ikea furniture that takes X amount of time to build no matter who builds it. We each have our own unique histories and as such the time it takes varies as much as our individual stories- it takes however long it takes.) I would not be able to afford access to this vital treatment if our government were to remove or reduce my access to basic rebates, through the ‘Better Access’ initiative, and enough of them if I need them.

With ‘Better Access’ our Government only pays for that point of service and not the ongoing running costs. Another real concern is that if psychological intervention becomes too expensive or out of reach then the practitioners will migrate towards larger centres or cities thus further impacting the service provision to rural and region Australia. If these proposed cuts were to go ahead I am concerned I could become completely reliant upon and be a financial burden to all Australians. I don’t know how I would be without the assistance of the Better Access intervention. I would hate to become what I have fought hard not to be and that is to become a drain on the public purse, not only would I have guilt but I would also feel like I had failed myself, my family and pretty much all Aussies. My Government is on the verge of failing to represent its employers, that is Australian citizens and moving toward removed behavior at the expense of its people.

I live in a rural area and currently I have very few options for treatment within my geographical area. I have a couple of private psychologists, a Mental Health Team at the hospital and a very limited ATAPS program (currently a maximum of 12 sessions) and one visiting Psychiatrist one day per fortnight. The proposed introduction of a web based treatment is so cold and impersonal that I would find it just too remote to engage with a person on a screen let alone be able to find the process therapeutic. Mental illness helps to make people feel removed from society and this process I imagine will only serve to cement this feeling further. I would not utilise this strategy. During my therapy travels I have seen Generalist Psychologists, Clinical Psychologists, Social Workers and Psychiatrists. The best results for me have been with a so-called "Generalist" Psychologist as I personally have found that for me and my experience that Psychiatrists wish to medicate and label my illness- this did not help me but did help me to feel bad about the situation as I wasn't responding to this treatment. I saw several Clinical Psychologists and one of them helped me considerably along my journey yet as time has gone by I have learned that they were ultimately a "one trick pony." My best results have been with two different Generalist Psychologists with varied backgrounds in treatment and my Government is telling me that my choice should be limited, that I am wrong and that they know best.

I can see a Psychiatrist for up to 50 rebated sessions per year (who is going to provide more Psychiatrists in my area? Who is going to pay the massive gap? I have NEVER received therapy from a psychiatrist and do not wish to be medicated so what use are these visits to me? Besides, my GP can take care of my medication requirements should I choose to go down that route again. I could go and see the local ATAPS and have NO say in who I see. What do I do if I run out of ATAPS sessions even if I could afford to pay for more sessions? I am not welcome to be seen until next year. What if I need more intervention, do I see my local Mental Health Team where perhaps I may get to see a Mental Health Nurse? No offense, I know they do good, valuable work but how is that going to be appropriate? My local Mental Health Team will not accept me until I am sufficiently unwell and even then I would only be seen until I am no longer "acute". What happens to me (and every other Australian like me) then? Do I then further push up our rising statistics of rural Aussie males committing suicide?

I see our Government cutting away a big umbrella that covers all of Australia (including those of the proposed reform focus) with the Better Access Program and replacing it with 30 to 60 focused pin heads that will only reach metropolitan and major rural centres and no doubt be incredibly inefficient both in successful targeting of clients and cost that will eliminate most Australians from accessing as they/we will not fall into this age/ diagnosis criteria. This is crazy. Our Government states that we need to reduce or even eliminate stigma for mental health on one hand yet on the other reinforces the same. Firstly why should my GP be given less incentive to refer me to mental health assistance than they do for

referring me to physical health assistance? Secondly, why am I prejudicially disadvantaged by a system of rebate that says if I had chosen a practitioner based on a name in front of Psychologist such as “Clinical” based on a title at universities and NOT based on years of education or indeed experience, expertise or competency when my outcome will be the same or in my case, better if I see a “Generalist” Psychologist? (It is my opinion that this is the equivalent of the age old Aussie war cry of Fords and Holdens. The Government has decided that they like Fords the best so everyone that drives a Holden can get a lesser rebate?) It has been my pleasure to have close associations with veterans over the years. One theme that is unmistakable is the direct correlation between poor mental health and poor physical health. People running on massive levels of adrenaline usually end up with Heart Disease, digestive issues, liver issues (self medicating with booze), dental issues – I used to wake up with powder in my mouth which used to be my teeth, I used to clench my jaw so hard that I have smashed a lot of teeth right out of my head- lots of other associated issues of either self neglect or direct self punishment. I have lost a lot of friends to all of these issues. I fear this “rationalisation” of a fair and equitable system of care will mean that I will have to get my funeral suit out again.

I despair for the direction our country has taken. I find my pride in this nation diminishing due to the trend of mass privatisation and over-bureaucracy leading to a massive drain on funds meaning basic services such as health are no longer able to be provided or actually prioritised, signs of an unresponsive government generally. If the Government is really running out of money and really need to save some, then I urge them to really consider the overall cost both in financial and other ways of cuts in this area as it is a false economy in both the short and long term. Never forget that indeed YOU and your loved ones, family, friends and acquaintances are just one event out of your/their control away from necessitating these very services as when they are gone, they are gone for everyone. What sort of world and country do you want to leave behind? If not you then *who* will care?