

Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

I live and work in a rural area very much influenced by horticulture, agriculture, the recent drought ('Exceptional Circumstances' area), water allocations, and weather! I work as an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker and have a Medicare Provider Number which enables me to work in two of the medical clinics in the region. I have worked in this role for 10 years, previously working for an organisation as a Mental Health Counsellor, and in schools in Counselling roles.

I hope, and intend, to continue working in this role for many years to come but am reliant on the government rebate to do this. Many, if not most, of my clients could not afford a gap of any sort. I believe that it is important to offer clients a range of services from different service providers.

I provide a high quality service to my clients and the community; with local doctors and visiting psychiatrists referring to me specifically (and not because there aren't enough mental health clinicians to refer to!). The good outcomes for clients from my mental health service provision speaks for itself. I therefore would like to see equity of remuneration for this standard of work to be in line with other payments for similar work by other professions. I am proud to be a Social Worker and associated with my professional body which is doing so much to ensure that service provision from Social Workers is of a high standard.

In reference to '(a)(iv) 'the impact of changes to the number of allied mental health treatment services for patients with mild or moderate mental illness under Medicare Benefits Schedule'. Currently I see a mixture of clients with moderate to complex severe, chronic mental health issues; some of whom benefit from being seen regularly on an ongoing basis. These chronic mental health (severe and complex) clients are few but it's not difficult to see that without this 'maintenance' contact, and ability to access a service provider; that their admissions to hospital would (and do) increase in frequency as well as their quality of life suffering. As it stands there is no other service to fill this gap and I would ask that these 18 sessions be made available to those in 'Exceptional Circumstances' with written approval from their doctor. To take this away from those most vulnerable would be risky at least.

We have workforce issues as is the case in other country areas. Recruitment and retaining of mental health clinicians has been an ongoing issue. Many of the non-government organisation workers in our region have little or no relevant tertiary qualifications, and therefore aren't registered with an appropriate professional body.

The issue of using online services (h) is one mental health clinicians are talking about more often. Currently tele-conferencing is used for some in-patient clients to access a psychiatrist. I'm sure that most psychiatrists, doctors, and mental health clinicians would prefer to have face to face consults with their clients, the outcomes are better as it develops relationship and trust. The use of telephone counselling might be useful but that again is limited in my opinion. The use of 'Skype' may be worth exploring as the ability to read body language is valuable both ways. There has been some discussion of security as an issue, however I'm unsure if it's any more or less secure than a tele-conference which is routinely used for psychiatrist assessment.

I suggest that the government retains the 18 sessions for those with chronic mental health illness with approval from their doctor.

I propose that Accredited Mental Health Social Workers get the same remuneration under the Medicare Benefits Schedule for the same work as other professions do.

I would hope that the government look at the quality of service provision to the community, and ensure that not only our mental health money is spent wisely but that quality service delivery is provided by qualified and trained mental health clinicians.

Yours sincerely

Accredited Mental Health Social Worker