

Parliament of Australia

Senate Committee Enquiry:

Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

I am writing to express my concern about the proposed changes to the Medicare rebate system for psychologists. I am specifically concerned about the proposed recommendations for the single, lower rebate for all psychologists, including Clinical Psychologists. My concerns are related to the impact which the proposed changes are likely to have on the Australian public and those Australians who benefit from specialist psychological services. The proposals also raise concern about the long-term economic cost to the nation and likely impact on the profession of psychology should the proposed changes occur.

To provide some context to support my concerns, it is necessary to understand the difference between the training requirements and skill sets of a Clinical Psychologist compared to a Psychologist with General Registration. Other than Psychiatry, Clinical Psychology is the only mental health profession in which post-graduate training is provided exclusively in the area of mental health. Clinical Psychologists specialize in the provision of evidence based or empirically supported therapies. Clinical Psychologists have extensive training in the assessment of psychopathology, formulation of treatment goals and delivery of empirically supported interventions. Clinical Psychologists place an emphasis on bringing research into professional practice to ensure accountability. Clinical Psychologists have a minimum of six years full time university training and maintain a high level of annual professional development to meet requirements for specialist endorsement and membership with the Australian Psychological Society.

This submission is not intended to detract from the skills or role of other psychologists or allied health professionals within our communities who play a crucial role in the delivery of front line services. This submission is intended to communicate my concerns should Medicare rebates for Clinical Psychology services become reduced.

I am acutely aware of the economic challenges which are going to face the nation in the future as we recover from the impacts of the global financial crisis and prepare for the challenges which our nation will face due to the aging population. I believe that we need to consider the area of mental health carefully and examine the most efficient and cost effective means of meeting the community needs in relation to mental health care. Given that epidemiological studies have recently qualified the prevalence of mental health problems in the community, it is evident that the nation requires Clinical Psychologists with expert training in psychopathology and delivery of empirically supported interventions.

The impact on our economy due to mental health disorders such as depression, stress and anxiety is immense due to issues such as workplace absenteeism, workplace funded employee support services, welfare benefits, work cover and the strain on public mental health services. I believe that the Federal Government needs to consider the economic cost to the Nation should there be no incentive for members of the public to access specialist Clinical Psychology services. Given that Clinical Psychologists have the highest level of training in relation to the treatment of mental health conditions it is logical to provide incentive, by way of greater rebates for the public to access Clinical Psychology services. Quite simply, the public should be given access to those professionals with the highest amount of training which is specialized to meet the needs of persons experiencing mental health difficulties.

A reduction or removal of additional rebates to access specialist Clinical Psychology Services is also likely to have a significant impact upon the profession of psychology and the future of Mental Health Care in Australia. At present, there is a significant emphasis placed on attaining Masters level training in psychology as it provides graduates with a significantly higher level of training. In addition, membership in the Australian Psychological Society's specialist colleges has enabled practitioners to gain additional financial benefits and rebates. With increasing fees associated with post-graduate education and greater financial pressures facing everyday Australians, there may be a significant reduction in the amount of persons willing or able to enrol in post-graduate psychology programs if there are no additional financial incentives available above those afforded to four year psychology graduates. Quite simply, this may result in fewer specialist psychologists being available within the community to support persons experiencing complex mental health difficulties.

I would urge the Parliament of Australia to consider the long-term impacts on the Nation if funding to Medicare rebates and Clinical Psychology services is reduced or withdrawn. Assisting the community to access specialist services and providing incentives for the public to access specialist Clinical Psychology services is likely to reduce the long-term economic costs to the nation and promote a better health system.