

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

8 July 2011

Dear Secretary,

Re: Committee Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

I wish to make a submission to the senate regarding the recent proposed changes to the funding and administration of mental health services. As a Clinical Psychologist who has undertaken a postgraduate doctoral program in clinical psychology, I feel disheartened and outraged by the proposed changes which I feel are naive, poorly researched and will have a detrimental impact on both the field of clinical psychology and those accessing psychological services. Specifically, I feel the removal of the two-tier system which currently recognises the specialist training and knowledge of those endorsed as 'clinical' psychologists, as well as proposed cuts to the number of sessions that can be claimed under the Better Access Scheme per year underestimate the complexity of mental health issues, and the resources, skill, time and knowledge it takes to address them.

Clinical psychology is a specialist field. Preparation for the speciality begins at the post-graduate level, with undergraduate courses providing the basis and grounding for further training and development. I stress that undergraduate courses, while necessary, cannot possibly cover the fundamental skills and knowledge necessary to practice clinically in an evidence-based and ethical manner. Clinical psychology has a special focus on the areas of personality and its development and course, and psychopathology and its prevention and remediation. This emphasis includes the full span of psychopathological disorders and conditions, etiologies, environments, degrees of severity, developmental levels, and the appropriate assessments, interventions, and treatments that are associated with these conditions (American Psychological Association, 2011). I therefore submit to the committee that removal of the two-tier system would result in poor and inappropriate delivery of assessments and interventions by psychologists who lack the knowledge and skill to give effective, evidence-based treatment; and this in turn would result in poorer mental health care, and even exacerbation of some conditions

which require specialist treatment. It would also serve as a disincentive to those undertaking post-graduate qualifications who sacrifice the ability to work full time for several years in order to develop their expertise in a given field. This would significantly tarnish Australia's reputation as a world leader in research and education.

As a Specialist Clinical Psychologist in private practice, I am greatly concerned about the impact of the Budget changes on patients with more severe mental health issues who are not eligible for psychological treatment provided by community clinics. These patients are likely to be significantly disadvantaged by the proposed, limited access to appropriate psychological treatment. There are consequences for both patients and the community when psychological treatment for serious mental health issues is not able to be completed. Patients are not likely to maintain treatment gains, and may experience a worsening of symptoms and decline in day-to-day functioning. A flow-on effect to relationships (e.g., marriage breakdown, family conflict) and employment (e.g., poor work performance, absenteeism, unemployment) often occurs. For many of my clients, the only barrier to their full recovery is financial constraints. Increasing these limitations further will be hugely detrimental.

In summary, the proposed changes will severely impact the mental health of Australians, access to appropriate and expert mental health treatment, and the study and practice of clinical psychology.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Jessica Brands
Clinical Psychologist