

Re: Submission for Senate Inquiry – Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

I have been using the Better Access to Mental Health scheme for the last few years and am going to be adversely affected by the plans to cut the number of available sessions from 18 to 10. I am also distressed and frustrated by the government and various high profile members of the mental health community depicting users of the scheme as the "worried well" and wasting taxpayer money.

I am 37 years old and have been battling anxiety since my mid teens. I didn't recognize it as such, all I knew was that I would feel nauseated when stressed. This extended to going anywhere, particularly where I would have to eat outside my home. I started avoiding going out when I could, and otherwise suffered through feeling like I was going to throw up. This continued for nearly a decade until 1998 when my life fell apart.

A combination of a number of distressing events including the deaths of two grandparents, balancing a Masters degree thesis and several part-time jobs, and the dismissal of hand pain by a rheumatologist as being in my head (it was diagnosed a year later as inflammatory arthritis), led to my first major panic attack at age 24. I spent the next 6 months to a year virtually housebound with crippling panic disorder and depression. I didn't seek help, just the thought of appointments was paralyzing. Being a scientist I also thought, if I just knew how panic attacks worked, I could fix myself. Even if I'd recognized the seriousness of my condition at the time, I would not have been able to afford counseling as I wasn't working, and my parents who are on a low superannuation pension were supporting me.

Over the next few years I improved at a snail's pace. I started to go out of the house, but I needed a family member with me and it was an all consuming fight to hold myself together against the panic. I was in a constant state of extreme nausea to the point of heaving.

It wasn't until about five years ago that a friend said to me, "I think you need help". I accessed a counselor through my work place and the healing began. For the first year or two I struggled to pay for the sessions myself, aided by free sessions provided by my employer. Thankfully I have been assisted by the Better Access to Mental Health scheme since.

There is no easy 'cure' for the level of anxiety I suffer. The longer you live with mental illness such as anxiety or depression, the more sensitive your body becomes to it. It is compounded by the chronic health conditions that have developed over the past decade. This includes inflammatory arthritis and compromised circulation. Winter is stressful, watching for signs of chilblains and vasculitis. I have already lost tissue on a finger, and was admitted to hospital last year with a gangrenous toe that also lost tissue. My health is unstable and unpredictable which adds to my level of anxiety.

I have a Masters (Hons) degree in atmospheric science and have published several papers in academic journals. However, due to the chronic fatigue associated with my autoimmune disease, I can't work fulltime or in my field of specialisation. I work 15 hours a week as an administration clerk and earn less than \$15000 per year. I am reliant on my family for both financial and emotional support. I have lost the future I'd worked so hard for, and this in itself adds to the level of emotional distress that I deal with. My ever-evolving health issues also make it harder to undertake the steps that help me deal with my anxiety.

My life is seriously hampered by my anxiety. It is humiliating that I haven't been able to catch public transport or go out by myself in 13 years. Over the last 5 years of counseling there have been setbacks, but there has been a definite gradual improvement in both my anxiety levels and my ability to cope. I am able to catch a train accompanied by a family member with relatively low anxiety and on the most recent occasion with no anxiety. I can cope for some time in public areas on my own. I can eat out without feeling like I'm going to throw up and sometimes even enjoy the meal. But I still have a way to go to become independent again.

I rely on the rebate I receive through the Better Access to Mental Health scheme, plus the free sessions my employer provides, to allow regular access to my counselor. She is a social worker/psychotherapist, and I was sick with worry last year when budgets plans called for the rebate to social workers and occupational therapists to be cut altogether. I have a rapport with her, I am comfortable with her, and that is the most important thing in a therapeutic relationship. She is helping me.

Cutting the number of sessions to 10 will mean I have less sessions per year. The comments made by various members of the mental health treatment community have been particularly distressing. It is difficult enough to recognize and come to terms with the fact that you can't fix yourself and that you need to ask for help, without the experts saying that you aren't sick enough and are a waste of taxpayer money.

The government's justification for the cut in the number of sessions tells me that I should have been 'fixed' in 6 to 10 sessions. I feel like I am being punished for not recovering quickly enough, but not being ill enough to need a psychiatrist. That I'm not trying hard enough, that I'm not strong enough because I need continuing support, that I don't deserve treatment.

There are many people struggling with serious issues who will be adversely affected by any cuts to the number of sessions available. I know teenagers and young adults who have suffered years of abuse who rely on this scheme to access a psychologist to help them reclaim their lives and stop the cycle of abuse. This can't be 'fixed' in 6 to 10 sessions, they require long-term support. They are reliant on government support or low paying jobs and can't pay for therapy themselves. What will happen to them with less sessions available?

Mental health issues, even the 'lesser' ones like anxiety, depression, OCD, and domestic violence, affect all aspects of our lives. They are as real and debilitating as physical illnesses, yet my access to a GP or specialist is not restricted to a certain number of appointments. The number of sessions available through the Better Access to Mental Health Scheme needs to be retained, if not increased. Cutting it from 18 to 10 sessions will disadvantage the people who need it most.