

Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee inquiry into Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

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Submission by  
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As a clinical psychologist I am aware of the importance of a government imperative to demonstrate cost savings in mental health; while cost-savings are important in any area of government spending, let us take care not to reduce services to those who are probably least able to speak out for themselves: those who suffer from severe mental health conditions. Under the present system, clients with diagnosable mental health conditions are authorized to seek psychological treatment for an initial six sessions, a further six after a review, and in exceptional circumstances a total of eighteen sessions in a calendar year. In my practice of 17 years as a clinical psychologist I have found that fewer than 12 sessions may be needed for clients with mild to moderate conditions. However, for those with moderately severe or severe conditions, even 18 sessions may not be adequate. Thus, the recommendation that assessment and treatment sessions authorized under Better Access be cut back to 10 sessions in a calendar year will result in suboptimal care for those who are most in need of ongoing mental health care. I would suggest considering an analogy between mental health conditions and physical health conditions such as Diabetes, lung, renal or heart disease. We do not limit people with physical health conditions to a certain number of sessions with a general practitioner or specialist in any given time period, and we should not do so for people who suffer chronic mental illness.

I would also like to recommend maintaining the two-tier system of payment for clinical psychologists. Clinical Psychology is one of nine specialized areas within Psychology. In 1965 Western Australia recognized Clinical Psychologists and Clinical Neuropsychologists as specialists, and this state's model apparently formed the basis for the 2010 National Registration and Accreditation Scheme. All specialized areas within psychology require a minimum of eight years education and training leading to advanced psychological competency in that field. Clinical psychologists' postgraduate training focuses on clinical evaluation and research, human development, evidence-based and scientifically-informed psychology and psychopathology, diagnosis, case formulation, psychotherapy, and psychopharmacology. Please also be aware that Australia is the only developed nation that requires only an undergraduate degree and two years of supervision for registration as a psychologist. Standards change as scientific research evidence becomes available, and what may have been acceptable educational standards many years

ago are no longer acceptable in a modern and increasingly complex world. This statement is not designed to denigrate non-clinical psychologists, but rather to note that we must move forward in lifting standards in psychology. One way of encouraging higher levels of expertise and standards is to provide higher levels of remuneration for those who provide evidence-based psychological treatment and have invested the time and expense needed to further their education.

Cc Minister for Mental Health, Mark Butler

Cc Shadow Minister for Mental Health

Cc Greens Spokesperson for Mental Health

Cc Member for North Sydney, Joe Hockey

Cc APS

Cc ACPA