

Submission to Senate Community Affairs Committee

Re: Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

I wish to comment on two aspects of the Terms of Reference

1. The impact of changes to the number of allied mental health treatment services for patients under the Medicare Benefits Schedule – particularly those provided by psychologists and clinical psychologists.

Whilst it may be that some clients serviced by psychologists and clinical psychologists under the Medicare Benefits Schedule have a mild or moderate mental illness it is my experience as a service provider that I am also seeing people with severe mental illness, such as severe depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, post traumatic stress disorder, agoraphobia, severe adjustment disorder to name a few. In fact it is my impression that since psychologists have been on the Medicare Benefits Schedule, presenting problems appear to be more severe than in the past. These conditions respond well to therapy but require more than 10 sessions. For lasting change quick fix therapy is not possible or helpful in the long term. I believe that many clients will be disadvantaged if the number of sessions covered by Medicare is restricted to 10 sessions. Ultimately this would lead to an increase in the mental health burden to the community.

2. The two-tiered Medicare rebate system for psychologists.

This is a complex issue and one that needs to be addressed based on fact and what science tells us rather than assumption and emotion. There is obviously precedence in other health professions to pay a higher rate to those with more years of professional education and training leading to specialisation. The assumption is made that the professional offers a higher level of skill and expertise. It seems that a well designed study to ascertain whether the extra training involved in the different areas of specialisation in psychology actually adds value to the service being offered is warranted. If that is found to be the case then it is clear that a higher rebate system for specialist psychologist is appropriate.