

Submission to Senate of Parliament of Australia

concerning

Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

1 Changes to the Better Access Initiative

The decision to reduce the number of rebatable sessions for patients with a diagnosable mental health disorder from 18 to 10 will severely disadvantage those members of the community with the most complex presentations and those in the most need. There is no evidence that supports the conclusion that 10 consultations is sufficient for therapist to produce significant reductions in symptom severity in those with chronic and/or severe mental illness. The proposed reduction will only promote inadequate and superficial treatments.

2 The two-tiered Medicare rebate system for psychologists

The two tiered system has been responsible for significant divisiveness within the profession with some specialist psychologists claiming that they are trained to a higher level in treating mental health problems than many others. The two tiered system has promoted this distinction and failed to recognise that psychologists trained in several specialities have equivalent skills in mental health treatment. The recent review of the Better Access initiative found that there was no significant difference in outcomes between those psychologists with clinical qualifications and those who did not possess this training.

I wish to recommend that the two tiered system be removed and that there be one level of rebate available to patients so that those with mental health disorders will still be compensated and they will be free to choose from amongst the broad range of psychologists for their treatment. This will do away with artificial distinctions between psychological practitioners, remove the ugly professional rivalry that has occurred and allow the market place to determine who is able to best provide the necessary treatments.

A further consequence of removing the two tiered system will be to stop the haemorrhaging of graduate programs other than in clinical psychology. Training for specialist psychologists has been disappearing rapidly as students apply for the clinical programs which will attract the higher income levels. Other graduate programs are soon to be non-existent, e.g. counselling psychology; health psychology; educational and developmental psychology; community psychology, etc.

Unfortunately, the two tiered system has created a culture of greed and while it might have been well-intended it can now be seen to have failed to deliver its intended outcomes and to have created professional difficulties that were not envisaged. I am keen to see the restoration of a wide range of training programs in psychology, the reduction in professional disputation and the provision of sensible and evidence based treatment protocols for those in the most need. To do this a single level of rebate should be instituted at a level that lies between the upper and lower levels of the current rebates.

Sincerely

3 August 2011