

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

28 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 student who is currently completing a postgraduate Masters degree 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. I entered a postgraduate program with the specific intention of developing a wide and comprehensive skill set, including supervised and critiqued practice that could only be developed through a postgraduate program. I am confident that I did not feel competent to assess and diagnose such a wide variety of psychological issues following a four year undergraduate program.

I am coming up to the final quarter of the Masters program and feel confident that I have developed a strong foundation to further develop my skills as a Clinical Psychologist across my career. Having worked in conjunction with individuals completing their four plus two practice, I have noticed the enormous gaps in their experience and knowledge, particularly in psychometric assessment and treatment of complex cases. It is very disheartening to consider that the intense study and practice completed in a postgraduate program could be considered equal to or even lesser than that completed by a general psychologist. 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 postgraduate 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, particularly as Australia is the only country which allows psychologists to work with less than six years of university qualifications. Clinical psychologists should be rewarded for their expertise and ability to work effectively with moderate to severe presentations. It does not make sense to remove the second tier nor cut the availability of sessions. If anything, those with less expertise should be removed from the Scheme to provide opportunities for effective treatment across the entire scope of mental health issues, rather than providing substandard services.

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.