

The Secretary
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

5 August 2011

Re: Inquiry into the Government's funding and administration of mental health services in Australia, with particular reference to: PSYCHOLOGY

Individual and Personal Submission from Ms Wendy Northey - Registered Psychologist

Dear Sir or Madam,

Preamble

1. My name is Wendy Northey and I am an Australian registered psychologist - a private practitioner who runs a buoyant small business in Melbourne CBD (Northey Consulting P/L). I have been practicing psychology for over fifteen year in the wake of a public service career across community and human services.
2. I write on behalf of all currently disenfranchised and disenchanting Australian psychologists – in particular the many thousands of fully registered psychologists who practice clinically on a daily basis but who are now unendorsed as clinical psychologists and financially and professionally discriminated against on that basis.
3. Despite their current plight, many of these psychologists feel, for various reasons, unable to speak out publicly on these issues so critical to their professional futures: I thereby cherish the freedom of speech provided by parliament to do so on their behalf.
4. In good faith I make this submission to the Australian Government Senate Inquiry into Psychology. I am happy for my name to be published together with this submission if the Senate sees fit to do so. This submission has a particular focus upon the negative impact of the 2-tier Medicare rebate for psychology and the associated Psychology Board of Australia (PBA) Endorsement System.

2-Tier Medicare system for Psychology

5. The 2-Tier Medicare rebate for psychology, discriminating as it does between ‘clinical’ and ‘non-clinical’ psychologists, has made a mockery of our formal education, our on-going professional development and our industrial experience by relegating the clients of ‘unendorsed clinical psychologists’ to a lower rebate for psychological services delivered under Medicare. We so called ‘non-clinical’ psychologists feel degraded and abused. Tax payer’s money is being wasted and our clients are unfairly disadvantaged.
6. The negative implications of this financial discrepancy alone are significant and widespread. These implications are outlined in attachments to other submissions to the Inquiry as listed by the Senate.
7. I remind the Senate that, whether they are practicing clinically or not, the clients of all psychologists who are not ‘clinically’ endorsed by the PBA receive \$38 less rebate for psychological services delivered under Medicare. Can you imagine what it is like for a practitioner to manage this irrational discrepancy?
8. Can you imagine the client frustration when they learn that their chosen psychologist will cost them more for essentially the same service – for no rational reason? We are unable to give them answers other than that the Government has got it wrong. We are struggling to maintain the financial viability of our practices in light of the now uneven playing field amongst treating psychologists. This discrepancy in status is completely unfair and irrational.
9. Many psychologists in private practice are slowly but surely going broke and losing their businesses. Families are suffering and livelihoods will be lost. We have no doubt that many ‘clinical’ psychologists will be thrilled to learn of this – all the more for them! However, it is ultimately the people and our economy that will suffer the most.

PBA Endorsement Policy for Psychology

10. The sole basis for the higher Medicare rebate for psychology is that some psychologists are ‘endorsed’ by the PBA in clinical psychology. Relevant research, including the formal Better Access Evaluation, informs us that the quality of service delivered by endorsed ‘clinical’ psychologists and unendorsed ‘clinical’ psychologists is at least equal, with unendorsed clinical psychologists having the edge in terms of the actual outcomes of their service delivery.
11. Unendorsed clinical psychologists are not less well qualified than their ‘clinically endorsed’ colleagues. Most simply became qualified via a different route to those who have been declared ‘endorsed clinical psychologists’ – or we chose not to join the APS College of Clinical Psychology.

12. Many ‘unendorsed’ psychologists who practice clinically have Masters Degrees and PHD’s in psychology – but not the ‘right’ degrees as it now transpires! It is not possible for us to gain entry to re-qualify. Nor can we afford to. I have only recently succeeded in paying off my HECS debt after ten years of university studies as a mature-aged student! Others have practiced in highly clinical settings for decades only to have their invaluable clinical experience disregarded and devalued.
13. My initial application for clinical endorsement was recently rejected outright by the APS. This shock response made me think ‘What have I been doing all these years? I thought I was successfully practicing clinical psychology – as I had been formally educated, trained, registered and employed to do!’
14. I am a former police psychologist. Police officers experiencing major depressive disorders, traumatised people with PTSD, criminal offenders with serious psychopathology – all these clients I have successfully assessed and treated were to count for naught. No, I was suddenly no longer a ‘clinical’ psychologist – just like that. There is currently no point in my applying to the PBA as the APS/PBA processes are essentially one and the same. It is to all intents and purposes now a closed shop – a cartel.
15. We are unable to comprehend how any government elected to serve the people of Australia can allow a small group of vested interests to disenfranchise the vast majority of a profession on what can only be described as a trumped-up and irrational, self-serving basis. Someone in Government is asleep at the wheel and we want them to wake them up! Either that, or they have been very badly misinformed – in which case their view needs to be properly informed and reviewed.

Further Industrial Experience

16. I have prided myself on working across the fields of clinical, counselling, forensic and organisational psychology. My formal education, supervision and continuing professional development together with broad industrial experience has made this approach possible and understandable.
17. I enjoy a challenge and have worked to keep myself well-qualified to take on demanding work. I have generally chosen to work by preference with the more difficult cases. Referring agents have always considered me to be a skilled and highly competent psychologist - including in the inherently linked area of clinical psychology. My expert evidence on clinical matters is sought, examined and accepted in all the courts of Australia. I was enrolled at Australian Universities for ten years in order to gain my formal academic education as a psychologist: BA, Grad Dip App Psych (Organisational), MCrim (Forensic Psychology - Melb). Throughout that time I worked within the public sector delivering service to a broad range of clients, families and organisations.

18. At the University of Melbourne I co-ordinated a university-based clinical and forensic psychology placement program for Masters and Doctorate students for three years; I have supervised post-graduate psychology students in my practice - at no cost and as my willing contribution towards the profession. In addition, I personally have thousands of hours of supervised psychology practice performed in clinical settings to add to my fifteen years of registered psychological practice since gaining full registration in Victoria.

Abuse of Power

19. The 2-Tier Medicare and closely associated PBA Endorsement system was the brain-child of a small group of academic psychologists who set the rules to suit themselves and their own narrow interests. These same academics basically gained control of the Psychology profession in Australia at a time when other psychologists were busy practicing full-time to provide the service to the community.

20. Those same academics set the endorsement rules and ultimately endorsed themselves very quickly in many areas – most have multiple endorsements across clinical, counselling, organisational and forensic psychology – how convenient for THEM. Naively, we trusted the people in our peak organisations to guard the best interests of their members and the profession. Instead, the vast majority of psychologists have been manipulated, betrayed and abandoned by those ‘colleagues’ in whom they placed their trust and good faith.

21. The only way I can personally describe how this small group was able to exercise the undue influence and power it did would be in terms of a coup. Whilst the majority of practicing psychologists were concentrating on providing the actual service of psychology to the public, a small and unrepresentative group of academics gained undue and unrepresentative power within key organisations including the APS, and subsequently the PBA.

22. Working in orchestrated tandem towards their selfish ends, it is clear from feedback obtained from many distraught psychologists that this self-serving minority of people has rendered the profession of psychology in Australia a distressed, distraught and dismembered mess. They have robbed a hitherto fine profession of dignity and integrity by operating what can only amount to a cartel – essentially a closed shop to all the registered psychologists who do not now qualify for ‘clinical endorsement’.

23. Please remember that these ‘requirements’ for ‘endorsed clinical practice’ have come into being many years after we have been registered as psychologists fully qualified to practice as clinical psychologists. One day we were fully qualified to practice clinical psychology – the next day we were not! There has been essentially no ‘Grandfather Clause’ to cover thousands of hard-working clinical psychologists delivering excellent clinical service to the Australian public over many decades of fine practice.

Overall Outcomes of this Abuse of Power

24. The small self-serving group of people now responsible for the anointing of the only 'endorsed clinical psychologists' have succeeded in making a mockery of our democratic processes. They have dismantled part of the fabric of our society. They have created hardship and misery for thousands of Australians, their families and their clients. They have simply changed the goal posts and run away with the ball - leaving the rest of their colleagues and their clients to fry!
25. We cannot get a straight answer out of any of them on pertinent issues: they continue to instrumentally manipulate all inquiries, public meetings and corporate requests in order to avoid admitting the truth – that the majority of Australian psychologists have been sold down the drain while a small group of endorsed 'clinical' psychologist are utilising their unfair advantage to consume our clientele! They appear to be thrilled to be able to do this. There has been no expression of regret or empathy for their disenfranchised colleagues – quite the opposite. No wonder we are angry.

Appeal to the Senate

26. In this individual submission to the Senate, I do not intend to detail information already available to you all from other sources. I am aware many 'clinical' psychologists and their representatives have set out to instrumentally manipulate the powers that be by a barrage of untruths, misrepresentation and skulduggery. Their self-serving and greed-driven actions are a disgrace to Australia and Australians.
27. I will instead appeal to you as fellow Australians with higher powers to set things right by carefully examining all the information available to you and acknowledging the injustice and irrationality of the 2-Tier Medicare system – together with its associated PBA Endorsement System.
28. I appeal to you good Senators of the Australian Senate to commence working to immediately set things right for the vast majority of psychologists in Australia whose professional lives have been torn apart and whose practices have been decimated.
29. **I call on the Senate to work for the immediate abolition of the Endorsement system altogether. It is a misconception of psychology practice in Australia and has done more harm than good across the profession and within the community. It is in fact a nonsense that we don't need.**
30. Clinical psychology is psychology practiced by psychologists in a clinical setting. It is not what only 'endorsed clinical psychologists' do. If clinical endorsement *must* remain, at least give us all a real Grandfather Clause and immediately endorse all Australian psychologists who were registered prior to the new laws. It is grossly unfair to retrospectively close the door on psychologists who have done all that was formally and legally required of them to become fully registered professional psychologists.

31. **I call on the Senate to work for the immediate abolition of the 2-Tier Medicare system. It is based upon a lie, is discriminatory and totally irrational. There should be one rebate only for all clients of all psychologists practicing clinically across Australia. All registered psychologists are educated to practice clinical psychology if they so wish. If not, we should be able to sue all the Universities who took our money and trained us in our chosen profession.**

Further Rationale

32. There is no such thing as superior work conducted by so-called ‘clinical’ specialists. The clients of all psychologists practicing clinically should be entitled to access any given Medicare rebate and that rebate should be equal for all clients. That would be fair, equitable and correct. Do not believe those who tell you that they are the only ones appropriately qualified to practise ‘clinically’. It is simply not true and cannot be substantiated or justified.

Conclusion & Plea

33. In my life, I have never expected to have to write a letter such as this. My belief in the fabric of our society has been shaken to the core by the injustice and wanton destruction that has been wreaked by a self-serving few within our Psychology profession. My faith in the University system, the financial system, the justice system and the political system has been deeply challenged. The fabric of our lives has been torn apart by these injustices.

34. ***I thereby call upon the good members of the Australian Government Senate to do all within their power to set things right in the name of truth, justice and a fair go for all Australian psychologists – and their hundreds and thousands of clients!***

Yours Sincerely,

Wendy Northey

Registered Psychologist

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