

4 August 2011

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

RE: THE BETTER ACCESS INITIATIVE

Dear Minister,

This letter is written with regards to the Government's proposal in capping the number of sessions available to people with a recognised mental health disorder to ten per year. At present the amount is 12. I can understand that a plan to introduce a 10 session cap may not seem like any great change. However, this is a numbers game, as around half the people that have a recognised mental health disorder also qualify for 'exceptional circumstances,' using the maximum of 18 visits per year. When it is seen in this light, treatments for the **Better Access** initiative will have almost been halved.

The new proposal released in the budget seems to ignore evidence from psychological research as well as ignoring the needs of people with mental health disorders.

I have been seeing a psychologist for the last three years after being diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Complex. I am grateful that the current scheme exists, as is my partner and my friends. We are all intelligent people who contribute to society and to our community.

During this time I have been able to move forward in my life with the hope of returning to earning my own income and therefore enjoying my life. I will tell you sincerely that without the help of the current Medicare initiative I doubt that I would have made the recovery that I am making. My illness not only affects me and my family and friends it has a residual effect on my community. At this time, I am unable to work and although my capacity is increasing I have a limited ability to socialise and therefore look for and maintain employment. I understand that the cost of this program has been expensive but I ask you what is the cost to this country in the long term if people are left untreated or even worse, reduced care mid treatment as it appears that I will be, if the action the government is thinking of taking goes through. There is a considerable cost involved in keeping people with mental illness untreated. As mental health issues are on the increase, nationally as well as globally, the hidden costs on our country if people are left untreated will escalate above and beyond what the government is financially concerned about now. As more people become ill then that is less people who can participate in this countries economy. The long term cost to keep a person sick (untreated) and therefore unemployed including Centrelink payments, medical cover and medication will reach hundred of thousands of dollars per person. One would ask "Can our country afford this type of financial output???????"

I was informed by our Federal Member that a person with cancer can access the Medicare system and it can cost as much as \$200,000 per person to treat this condition. My argument is not every one survives cancer but with professional intervention a person with certain mental illness can become functional again and therefore become an active member of our

community. With professional intervention a person with permanent illness can learn how to manage the symptoms and therefore have the opportunity to become a productive member of our society.

Taking a hard line on mental health consumers is not a practical action. Many people who receive services via the Better Access initiative are consulting with a mental health professional for the very first time. It is unrealistic to expect people that are in a vulnerable psychological state to achieve the following under 10 sessions:

- To develop confidence
- To trust in a mental health professional immediately
- To work through their difficulties

I became unwell due to many traumatic experiences during childhood which then filtered into my adult life. I have spent most of my life working, studying and improving my knowledge and skills so that I could have a 'normal' chance at life and contribute to my community. Imagine how devastated I was to discover that I am now having to deal with mental illness as a result of negligence on the part of those who were supposed to protect and nurture me. In essence this arbitrary treatment by the government to change existing service condition for people with my condition not only lacks insight and compassion but vision. If we continually keep avoiding the difficult topics that modern life brings to us then how can we ever move forward in powerful and productive ways if we only focus only on the money issues. Healthy people work harder and more efficiently and have the potential to increase their productivity.

The new proposals also create obstacles for people with a mental health disorder, obstructing them from receiving what is usually 'time-critical' care. Consumers should not have the added pressure and stigma associated with needing to recover quickly, then be at risk of being referred on and having to start again with a new practitioner. It has taken me 3 years to build a relationship with my practitioner and to accept that I will not get better by pushing myself harder. I have taken the brave step of trusting in the current system to recover only to have the additional pressure of having to gain my health in 10 sessions. I have heard many comments that this push by psychologists is only to line their own pockets, I could not disagree more. My psychological team have not only reduced their scheduled fee by half, as have many, but they give me a further discount when my 18 visits run out. These people have given me assistance above and beyond what they legally have to. I am truly grateful for the respectful treatment and kindness that these people have offered me and I'm sure many (if not all) of their clients. I am recovering and am currently looking for part time work which is something that I never thought I would be able to say again.

Australia is changing quickly, becoming a multicultural nation now more than ever. New arrivals will have their fair share of problems too, especially people from third world and/or war-torn areas that have been fighting for generations. Without treatment these people will bring their traumatised behaviours and ideas into our society thereby having a greater impact than originally suspected.

Minister, I urge you to reconsider these proposals immediately, if nothing else leaving the length of treatment for the *Better Access* initiative at 12 sessions, with an additional 6 for exceptional circumstances.

Yours Sincerely,

Lee-Anne Dawson