

1 August 2011

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs  
P.O. Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra, ACT, 2600  
Australia

Dear Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs,

**RE: Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services Reference e) mental health workforce issues, including (i) the two tiered Medicare rebate system for psychologists**

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Commonwealth Funding and Administration of mental health Services. It is encouraging to the Government's 2011-12 Budget changes relating to mental health. However, I am concerned about the proposed changes to the two-tiered Medicare rebate system for psychologists.

I am a postgraduate student and a provisional psychologist in my third year of completing a Doctor of Psychology, specialising in Clinical Psychology. I have been studying at the University of Queensland for 7 years (4 years for my Psychological Science Degree, with Honours, and 3 years for my Doctor of Psychology). I am confused as to how an individual who has undertaken 7 years of training, with the final 3 years specialising in advanced clinical work, can be equated to someone with 4 years of training, especially as in the 4 years of training, a broad array of psychological courses are taken that do not focus on clinical assessment, formulation, and treatment. Specifically, generalist psychologists have not received training in treatments endorsed by the Medicare scheme (e.g., cognitive behaviour therapy and interpersonal therapy). In my opinion, only clinical psychologists are appropriately equipped to administer these psychological treatments as we have received rigours training in the assessment and treatment psychological disorders as prescribed by the Medicare scheme.

Clinical psychologists use their knowledge of psychology and mental health for the assessment, diagnosis, formulation, treatment, and prevention of psychological problems and mental illness across the lifespan. We research psychological problems using our psychological knowledge to develop scientifically based approaches to improve mental health and well-being. My postgraduate training has equipped me to be able to achieve these goals. Generalist psychologists simply do not receive this training. The claim that a generalist/registered psychologist should expect the same pay and recognition as a postgraduate trained specialist psychologist is the equivalent of a GP claiming that they should be recognised and paid as a neurosurgeon. This does not hold in other professions and should not hold in psychology.

Moreover, if there was no difference between a generalist/registered psychologist, why would anyone go on and do further postgraduate study specialising in a area of psychology, foregoing income for several years and also paying high University fees in order to complete the program? Also, why would Universities even offer specialist postgraduate programs and why would there be a body that assess these programs to ensure they are meeting standards (i.e., Australian Psychology Accreditation Council) if there was 'no difference' between generalist and clinical psychologists? Individuals will not go on and complete postgraduate study if they do not receive

the recognition and pay they deserve. Inevitably, this will reduce the standards in our profession and negatively impact consumers as they will not be receiving the best possible care.

The major psychological organisations in Australia recognise endorsed areas of practice within psychology (e.g., Australian Psychological Society, Australian Psychology Accreditation Council, and the Psychology Board of Australia). Furthermore, these organisations are actually pushing for the abolishment of the 4+2 program to becoming registered as a Psychologist. Australia is the only English speaking country that allows someone with an undergraduate degree to fully practice within the profession of psychologist. This renders our country as having the lowest standards for professional practice and is not in line with the rest of the world. The American Psychological Association states that "...what distinguishes Clinical Psychology as a general practice speciality is the breadth of problems addressed and the populations served." In essence, only clinical psychologists are appropriately trained to manage moderate to severe psychological difficulties. I believe that Australian people with moderate to severe mental health issues are the ones who will be most affected by these proposed changes, as if the rebate was reduce for clinical psychologists, fewer people will go on and complete postgraduate training – why would you sacrifice receiving income for 3 years if you can get the same recognition and pay through the Medicare scheme with only an undergraduate degree?

If costs do need to be cut, it should not be from the individuals with the most training who are best equipped to assist in managing psychological difficulties.

I look forward to hearing a response from the Inquiry.

From a Provisional Psychologist