

Senate enquiry

Submission

Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

Re: Two Tier Fees for Psychology Services

I am an endorsed Counselling psychologist and an endorsed Education and Developmental psychologist, with over 35 years of experience as a practitioner, and 10 years as an academic and researcher, coordinating the specialist Education and Developmental course at a G8 University. I currently have no personal interest in private practice, and nothing to gain from higher or lower fees paid differentially to different specialisms within psychology. Interestingly, since the introduction of the two tier Medicare system, demand for entry into the courses I coordinate in Educational and Developmental psychology has increased some three fold, and we are only able to provide places for nine per cent of applicants.

I am greatly encouraged by an enquiry that promises to be open and fair-minded, and trust that the enquiry will carefully and clearly consider the evidence of efficacy for practitioners from different specialisms, not simply the claims of one group within psychology being “more scientific.” I would like to contest the ambit claims of numbers from within the clinical lobby, that of their expertise and training being comprehensively superior to those high standards of evidence-based research and training that underpin the psychology courses and training within other psychology specialisms. Further, in so claiming their all-encompassing expertise across the board, I challenge their capacity for depth of expertise in any one area that warrants consideration as specialist training, i.e. it suggests to me (and I believe is confirmed by my observations of practitioners) that this group are in fact better to be regarded as general practitioners. Today, specialities in all disciplines are the product of the 20th and 21st century knowledge explosion. We need to challenge how any one psychologist can realistically, no matter how intelligent, acquire and maintain high-level specialist expertise and skills across all areas of psychological expertise/speciality.

My problem with the current arrangements of the two tier rebates with higher rebate for only one group of psychologists in fact amounts to no more that a specialist rebate for a group who, by their own claims of comprehensive all encompassing service provision, can in fact be no more than general practitioners. Such a case for a higher rebate for across-the-board services by one group is based I suggest on an unsustainable claim that anyone can be expert at everything.

There is wisdom in the old saying, “a jack-of-all trades, a master-of-none”. With in-depth specialist knowledge comes an appreciation of the fragility of human understanding, a humble appreciation of how little we really know in our own area of expertise, with a reticence to be a “know all” in other areas a mark of someone who probably really *is* an expert in their field. As an academic I am continually struck by how the brightest students are more unsure, inevitably aware of how little we know and how poorly we actually understand, feeling undeserving of their marks, while the poorer students all too often do not seem to comprehend the limits and shortcomings of their understanding, often not comprehending why they have not gained higher marks. It is a dangerous person who does not have a sober and realistic estimation of their limitations, and a troubling health system that rewards their problematic ambit claims.

Proposition for the Enquiry:

With all respect I suggest that Specialist rates should be rebateable only for specific assessments/procedures/treatment/therapies when carried out by specialists with advanced skills, training and experience in those particular areas, not simply for generalised clinical practice. Each specialism in Psychology other than clinical *already* has its distinctive focus and specialist area(s) of training based on rigorous scientific research that is common across all psychological training in Australia as a result of stringent accreditation procedures and academic excellence in Australian universities. The current arrangements for the two tier system has in my opinion done a great disservice to the public benefit of psychology, serving to distort the practice of psychology in Australia by marginalising and deprecating other specialisms where it has been taken by one group falsely as validation that their practice is somehow more efficacious, despite no evidence of differences in terms of mental health outcomes.

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5th August 2011