

3rd August 2011

Submission for the Enquiry into Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

I am a Clinical Psychologist working in private practice and have until recent months also worked in the public system. I wish to voice my concerns regarding the proposed changes to the Medicare rebates and entitlements. I have chosen to do this by explaining some practical examples from my daily practice to address the pertinent points and to describe the type of clients who will be denied access to treatment.

1. Proposed Reduction in Medicare Rebate for Clinical Psychologists.

A lower rebate for Clinical Psychologists will result in the more vulnerable clients being unable to access appropriate mental health services. Public Mental Health services are currently working to capacity and I see a number of clients who would be seen in the public system if there were spaces for them. These people are generally under financial strain, so are bulk billed. If the current rebate is reduced I will need to charge a gap fee and many of my clients will not be able to afford this. This will ultimately force them into the public system in crisis eg. failed suicide attempts, self harm. Alternatively, the legal system may need to deal with others who have anger management problems or those with a psychotic illness who are not able to be monitored due to not having access to suitable mental health care services.

2. Proposed Reduction in the Number of Services from 18 to 10.

Many of my clients have chronic mental health problems which could not adequately be dealt with in 10 sessions per year. In these clients it often takes months for clients to learn to trust somebody else. Access to 18 sessions per year enables such clients time to learn and absorb the necessary information (psychoeducation), and allows them to practice skills learnt and refine these skills over time. It also allows for ongoing assessment and validation, as well as ongoing problem solving. Behaviour change in these clients takes time, often years.

I see many clients who have been diagnosed with personality disorders, who have been subjected to trauma and abuse of various types as well as some clients with psychotic disorders. These clients require concentrated long-term management to facilitate changes in behaviour. I have heard staff in the public system say that their service (public system) is not a long-term one (eg. for those clients with personality disorders), so where are these clients supposed to go for help if access to 18 sessions is reduced to 10? There is currently a focus in the public health system to shorten the time clients are in the service (including involvement with community mental health teams associated with public hospitals) and to link them in with other providers in the community. This goal may be good in theory, but it does require suitable services and access to these services be available to clients in the community. A reduction in the number of services from 18 to 10 will jeopardize the mental health many of these marginalised clients.

3. Clinical Psychologists are specialized in clinical psychology.

Clinical Psychologists undertake an extra number of years study, research and clinical practice to achieve the title of “Clinical Psychologist”. This is over and above what is required of a Generalist Psychologist. This education involves a minimum of 2 years full-time study at Masters level, study, research and supervised practice, plus a further year of supervised practice from an already qualified Clinical Psychologist in the workplace. The educational component involves specialized training in assessment, diagnosis, psychological interventions, evaluation, report writing and critical analysis of research documents. These skills are tested and supervised rigorously, and students do not pass the program unless they obtain the required standards. This enables provision of specialized clinical training.

It is mandatory for Clinical Psychologists to maintain ongoing professional development and supervision. Professional development involves attending workshops or seminars specifically pertaining to the area of practice ie. Clinical Psychology. (These workshops are often very expensive). However, this assists with ensuring that Clinical Psychologists are up-to-date with current practice and research and are accountable for their practice.