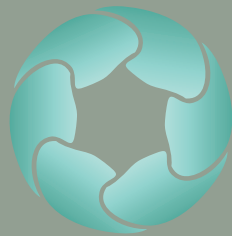


SUBMISSION
Senate Inquiry into the
Commonwealth Funding and Administration
of Mental Health Services



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Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

About NPG

NPG offers a diverse range of psychology-based services to the Australian population. We are committed to employing our expertise in the mental health sector to enhance the psychological health and wellbeing of the greater community.

One of our main goals has been to make mental health services more accessible to those who need it, regardless of their circumstances. We are acutely aware of the many barriers to such services. Our aim therefore is to provide all Australians with access to mental health services.

NPG has invested a great deal of energy into adapting best practice psychological interventions for various issues, into computer-based online programs capable of improving community access to mental health services. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which is the benchmark therapeutic modality for psychological intervention in Australia and around the world, has been adapted for use in such online programs. Thus NPG presents CBT principles to users via interactive online computer programs that guide them step by step through a treatment and intervention process.

The computer-based counselling programs are highly structured and draw on multimedia techniques to present information in an interactive manner. The programs can be administered online, making them easily accessible to everyone with internet access. Our programs are also equipped with screening devices that enable administrators to check for the type and level of psychopathology users may exhibit, and check online on user progress.

Capable of wide dissemination via the internet, these online treatment programs provide the opportunity for huge uptake in often underserved rural and remote locations, where access to psychological services is difficult.



Focus of submission

NPG's submission is concerned primarily with item H of the inquiry's terms of reference:

The impact of online services for people with a mental illness, with particular regard to those living in rural and remote locations and other hard to reach groups.

Summary of recommendations

- a) NPG supports the Government's online services initiative.**
- b) Computer-based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CCBT) is effective in the treatment of many psychological conditions.**
- c) While all Australians will benefit greatly from access to quality online Mental Health Services, rural and remote residents will be particularly advantaged.**
- d) Online services are cost-effective without compromising on quality.**
- e) The greatest benefit will occur if online services are directly accessible and used as a gateway for other mental health services.**
- f) A rebate system, similar to Medicare's current bulk billing arrangements for online mental health practitioners and services, is vital to CCBT's success.**



Detailed Recommendations

NPG supports the Government's online services initiative.

NPG commends the Government's initiative to expand and fund online mental health services. The 21st century has seen incredible developments in online technology with most Australians now having ready and reliable access to the internet. Technologies developed for mental health services have provided services to many people who otherwise would not have been able to access traditional face-to-face services.

Financial support from the Government, combined with the roll-out of the National broadband network (NBN), will facilitate a rapid and innovative expansion of quality computer-based mental health services.

Computer-based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CCBT) is effective in treating many psychological conditions.

Randomised controlled trials have confirmed the efficacy of CCBT in treating depression, generalised anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social phobia, and other common mental disorders. Titov (2007) found that the impact of CCBT programs in treating a range of mental health issues was comparable to face-to-face CBT with a therapist. The research also found that CCBT treatment is very cost-effective and well accepted by participants of the treatment programs.

All Australians will benefit greatly from access to quality online mental health services, in particular rural and remote residents.

CCBT programs like those developed by NPG can be used as an effective part of a tiered model of psychosocial intervention by Australians living in rural and remote areas. As access is a major barrier to treatment, screening can target those individuals who may be suited to online treatment programs. The programs can also be used as an adjunct to counselling conducted face to face, by phone and via video-conferencing methods. Through the initial screening of rural and remote populations for level and type of psychological distress, targeting the right treatments will be more effective and those deemed suitable for CCBT programs will finally benefit from readily accessible quality mental health assistance.



Online services are cost-effective without compromising on quality.

With the average cost of psychological interventions being around \$1600, based on 2006 figures (Hilton), NPG has been able to develop and provide best practice CBT-based online psychological intervention programs for significantly less than \$900 per person. NPG's CCBT programs focus on various psychological interventions ranging from anxiety and depression treatment through to basic stress management.

CCBT programs should be constantly reviewed and upgraded according to contemporary research into effective treatment delivery. The CCBT programs can also be easily expanded in line with the development of effective treatment and interventions for an array of psychological issues, thus maintaining their integrity and efficacy.

Hilton, M. (2006). *Assessing the financial return on investment of good management strategies and the WORC Project*. The University of Queensland and The Queensland Centre for Mental Health Research.

Online services should be directly accessible to users and used as a gateway to other mental health services.

While better access to mental health initiatives has greatly increased the numbers of people accessing psychological treatment, many people with mental health problems often fail to seek treatment for fear of being stigmatised by the community. This is especially profound in smaller rural communities where health professionals often have shared social networks with their patients.

CCBT programs enable people to access services directly, at their convenience, and with total anonymity. Programs can assess people's distress, identify appropriate treatments and provide information on accessible mental health professionals.

A rebate system, similar to Medicare's current bulk billing arrangements for online mental health practitioners is vital to CCBT's success.

A system that offers practitioners rebates for services provided via the internet will ensure that projects are developed and supervised by experienced, skilled and accountable professionals. Each practitioner brings a unique style and experience to the therapeutic relationship and it is this relationship that is considered a key predictor of the success of psychological treatment. There is a serious risk that if online services were outsourced to select organisations, therapeutic interventions would become homogenised and the industry would lose much of its diversity to the detriment of the service users.