

The following submission to Senate is to protest the proposed budget cuts to the Better Access to Mental Health Care

Dear Senators

I am a Clinical Psychologist working in Sydney, New South Wales.

I am writing to you concerning the recently announced budget cuts to psychological treatment under the Better Access scheme. As a result of this budget, my clients will be able to have only 10 therapy sessions per calendar year. This is a substantial loss to my clients many of whom currently take full advantage of the 12-18 sessions available to those most in need. I work in Redfern where the need is great and where many clients are suffering from quite severe mental illness, depression and anxiety, sometimes with psychotic symptoms, personality disorders, drug addiction, or other serious psycho-social problems, and often as a result of very traumatic experiences, and deprived childhoods. Many are Aboriginal. These clients are not ill enough to warrant hospitalisation but they are often a considerable burden to the state, being on welfare, disability pensions, government housing, rehabilitation or parole. For some, there is little if any hope of ever being able to work (again) but for others the psychology sessions are providing hope and opening realistic expectations that they might be able to improve their situation, contribute to society, and eventually return to work. Many of these clients take full advantage of the 18 sessions currently allowed per calendar year. They would benefit from *more*, not fewer, sessions.

According to APS statistics, clients attending the full 18 sessions currently allowed by the Better Access scheme represent only 5% of the persons accessing the scheme. They therefore consume only a very small part of the Better Access funding. However, they represent the really needy end of the spectrum of clients benefitting from the scheme. Surely it cannot be the intention of the current government to withdraw support from these most deserving and needy persons?

I am at a loss to explain the new budget to my severely ill clients, many of whom have heard, as I have, that this government is committed to supporting mental health care and is putting *more* money into mental health care. I have had many clients in states of consternation or in tears over the budget news when I have told them about the forthcoming cuts!

Some of these clients currently spread out their sessions over the year so as to have ongoing support over the whole year. For these clients, ten sessions per calendar year represents fewer than one per month and for many, who lack family and social support, the end of the year (Christmas time) is the time when they need their therapist's support most of all!

What will happen to these clients as a result of the proposed cuts? Most will go untreated. Some will deteriorate further and be hospitalised, or worse. A few may be referred on to specialised Psychiatrists who practice psychotherapy (often with very little training). Psychiatrists have much higher fees, cost the government far more money, not many offer psychotherapy and very few bulk bill.

ATAPS is no substitute for the Better Access scheme as ATAPS is unreliable and frequently runs out of funding...

I hope the Senate will take this matter seriously and fully restore the Better Access scheme to ***at least*** 18 sessions per calendar year.

Thank you for reading this submission.

Yours sincerely, Jeanne Abelson.

Clinical Psychologist