

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
Po Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

25th July, 2011

Dear Committee,

Re: Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

I would like to thank the Senate for initiating an inquiry into mental health funding and want to take this opportunity to respond with a particular focus on the following aspect of the inquiry's terms of reference:

(e) Mental Health Workforce Issues

(i) The two-tiered Medicare rebate system for psychologists

The current two-tiered Medicare rebate system for psychologists represents an unfair and discriminatory distinction between clinical psychologists and other endorsed psychologists, such as counselling psychologists. Counselling psychology (along with clinical psychology) is one of nine recognised endorsed specialist areas of practice under the Psychology Board of Australia. However, for Medicare rebate purposes, counselling psychologists are recognised only as generalist psychologists, equivalent to those psychologists with four years of university training. Both clinical and counselling psychologists have a minimum of six years of formal academic study which includes a Master's or Doctoral degree, two years of supervised practice, and extensive training in assessment, diagnosis, psychopathology and provision of psychological therapy (in some tertiary institutions, students in clinical and counselling psychology postgraduate training programs attend the same classes for these subjects). Furthermore, in the US and UK, counselling psychologists and clinical psychologists are both considered front-line mental health providers with equal access to health and insurance rebates (Munley, Duncan, McDonnell, & Sauer, 2004).

However, at present, under the Better Access to Mental Health Care scheme, only clinical psychologists are allowed to provide 'psychological therapy'. This is highly discriminatory, as counselling psychologists are specialists in the provision of psychological therapy, as noted in the Australian Psychological Society (APS) definition of counselling psychology:

Counselling psychologists are specialists in the provision of psychological therapy. They provide psychological assessment and psychotherapy for individuals, couples, families and groups, and treat a wide range of psychological problems and mental health disorders. Counselling psychologists use a variety of evidence-based therapeutic strategies and have particular expertise in tailoring these to meet the specific and varying needs of clients (Australian Psychological Society, 2011).

This is also consistent with the Psychology Board of Australia (PBA) description of counselling psychology, which affirms that counselling psychologists are specialists in the provision of psychological therapy (Psychology Board of Australia, 2011).

I urge the committee to address the discrimination that has been present in the Better Access scheme since its commencement in 2006. Of particular relevance is the Psychological Therapies, MBS item numbers 80000 – 80020, which are currently only able to be provided by clinical psychologists. I recommend counselling psychologists be able to provide these items, as one of their core areas of expertise is in providing psychological therapy for a range of mental health disorders.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Di Mattia, MAPS
Counselling Psychologist

References

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- Munley, P.H., Duncan, L.E., McDonnell, K.A., & Sauer, E.M. (2004). Counseling psychology in the United States of America. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 17(3), 247-271.
- Psychology Board of Australia. (2011). *Guidelines on area of practice endorsements*. Retrieved July 24, 2011, from <http://www.psychologyboard.gov.au/Codes-and-Guidelines.aspx>