

7th July 2011

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

Dear Committee Members,

Re: Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee proposal to abolish the two-tiered Medicare rebate system for psychologists.

I am writing this letter to express my objection about the Committee's proposal to change the two tiered Medicare rebate system for psychologists. Currently I am able to access mental health care under the Better Access to Mental Health Care initiative with a specialist clinical psychologist at Northwest Psychological Services in Melton, Victoria. Further, these services are bulk billed for all consumers.

Clinical psychologists are trained to provide service for the most complex mental health issues. I feel that the quality of my care would be compromised if I were unable to receive the current level of specialist intervention for my mental health issues that my clinical psychologist provides.

Ms. Kylie Clarke (principal clinical psychologist) and her associates are dedicated to providing Bulk Billed consultations to all consumers receiving service. Melton is a low socio economic area with a rapidly expanding population and a limited number of medical and mental health services. The abolishment of the two-tiered Medicare rebate for psychologists would result in the discontinuation of the Bulk Billing arrangement at Northwest Psychological Services. Given the ongoing pressures associated with the cost of living, I would not be able to afford a gap payment, so I could no longer receive the specialist clinical psychology treatment I require.

Already the government has reduced the number of sessions available to people with a recognised mental health disorder to a maximum of 10 sessions in any calendar year. Previously, consumers of mental health care services could receive a maximum of 18 sessions, so the cuts have already resulted in unrealistic expectations of treatment. Now, abolishing the two-tiered rebate system goes against the decision-making of mental health consumers, with many people likely to need specialist clinical psychology treatment.

The new proposal, abolishing the two-tiered rebate, ignores evidence from psychological research. It also ignores the needs of people with significant mental health disorders in disadvantaged areas. Reviews in the area of mental health care are important, however, this should not be to the detriment of our existing programs in mental health care that have been shown to work effectively.

The new proposals to abolish the two-tiered Medicare rebate for psychologists are not good enough and need to be revised as soon as possible.

Taking a hard line on mental health consumers is not the answer. The overwhelming majority of people who receive services via the Better Access initiative are consulting with a mental health professional for the first time. Consumers with significant mental health issues who are experiencing a vulnerable psychological state want to develop confidence and trust in a psychologist who has specialist training and skills as well as extensive experience in the field of mental health. Consumers who live in low socio-economic areas and who face the ongoing challenges of the cost of living deeply value their ability to access specialist mental health care under a bulk billing arrangement.

Consumers do not need the added pressure and stigma associated with being unable to afford an incredibly important specialist service that addresses one of the greatest issues that impacts their quality of life. The new proposal creates obstacles for people with a mental health disorder, obstructing them from receiving the specialist and complex intervention they require.

I urge the Senate committee to reconsider the proposal to abolish the two-tiered Medicare rebate for psychologists immediately, ensuring that all consumers have the opportunity to access specialist mental health services with the appropriately qualified specialist clinical psychologists. Further, I urge the Senate committee to consider the importance of continued access to Bulk Billed services in localities such as Melton, Victoria where mental health needs are complex, socio-economic issues are paramount and we face a rapidly growing population amongst a shortage of mental health services.

Sincerely,

Tamara Plotzza