

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 On 25 June 2014, the Senate established the Senate Select Committee on Health.¹ The final reporting date for the committee is 20 June 2016. The committee's resolution allows the committee to make interim reports such as this one.

Public hearings

1.2 The committee has completed 38 public hearings to date. A list of hearings which focused on mental health is at Appendix 1.²

1.3 Through its extensive program of public hearings, the committee has taken evidence from many health experts, practitioners, consumers and communities. The public hearing program has also enabled the committee to engage the wider Australian community, including those in rural and regional areas which may not normally be able to directly engage with the parliamentary process.

1.4 Throughout the committee's inquiry, mental health issues have been raised by witnesses and submitters in connection with evidence about the primary and acute healthcare systems. In order to examine these issues in more detail, the committee held three hearings focussing specifically on mental health:

- 26 August, Canberra;
- 28 August, Hurstville, Sydney; and
- 18 September, Redcliffe, Brisbane.

Submissions

1.5 The committee has received 170 submissions since the beginning of its inquiry. In relation to mental health issues, the committee has received 19 submissions. A list of submissions relating to mental health is at Appendix 2.³

1.6 The committee's terms of reference are wide-ranging. It is the committee's intention to explore various issues in depth over the course of its inquiry. While the committee is still accepting general submissions, it is the committee's intention to seek submissions on specific topics as the need arises over the course of the inquiry.

1.7 Additional information, tabled documents, correspondence and answers to questions on notice received by the committee to date and related mental health are listed at Appendix 3.⁴

1 *Journals of the Senate*, 25 June 2014, pp 996–998.

2 Public hearing details can also be accessed via the committee's website: www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Health/Health/Public_Hearings.

3 The submissions received by the committee can be accessed via the committee's website: www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Health/Health/Submissions.

Health Committee's first interim report

1.8 The committee's first interim report was tabled on 2 December 2014.⁵ That report detailed the committee's findings and conclusions at that time, focussing on issues raised during the committee's hearings and through submissions. Key areas of focus in the first report were:

- the government's proposed patient co-payments, cuts to hospital funding and the abolition of Australian National Preventative Health Agency;
- the government's plan to close the 61 Medicare Locals and replace them with 30 Primary Health Networks; and
- the merger of the Organ and Tissue Authority and the National Blood Authority.

Second interim report

1.9 The committee's second interim report was tabled on 24 June 2015.⁶ That report encompassed the committee's findings regarding the government's primary healthcare and general practice policies. In particular the report was a record of the government's frequent changes of policy since the 2014-15 Budget. The second interim report focused specifically on:

- the vital importance of general practice and primary healthcare and the threat posed by the government's numerous policy changes since the 2014-15 Budget;
- the responses of GPs and the primary healthcare sector to the government's various primary care policies; and
- an examination of the 2015-16 Budget's health measures and commentary from stakeholders.

Third interim report

1.10 The committee's third interim report was tabled on 17 September 2015.⁷ That report examined the government's proposed privatisation of Australian Hearing and the National Acoustics Laboratories. The proposal was originally recommended by the National Commission of Audit in February 2014.⁸ In the 2014-15 Budget the government allocated funding for a scoping study for the proposed privatisation of

4 The submissions received by the committee can be accessed via the committee's website: www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Health/Health/Additional_Documents.

5 *Journals of the Senate*, 2 December 2014, p. 1948. The report can be accessed at: www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Health/Health/First_Interim_Report.

6 *Journals of the Senate*, 24 June 2015, p. 2809. The report can be accessed at: www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Health/Health/Second_Interim_Report.

7 *Journals of the Senate*, 17 September 2015, p. 3158. The report can be accessed at: www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Health/Health/Third_Interim_Report.

8 National Commission of Audit, *Phase One Report*, paragraph 10.1 and recommendation 57.

Australian Hearing.⁹ The 2015-16 Budget included the postponement of a decision on the scoping study, pending further consultation.¹⁰

1.11 The third interim report outlined the evidence taken at the 10 July 2015 public hearing and the related written submissions made by witnesses. It also examined:

- the impacts privatisation would have on users of the Australian Hearing services; and
- the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and Australian Hearing.

Structure of this report

1.12 This fourth interim report examines the mental health issues witnesses and submitters have raised with the committee. The report looks at these issues in the context of the National Mental Health Commission's *National Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services Report* and the pending government response. In addition to this introductory chapter, the report includes six chapters:

- background—setting the broad context of mental health policy in Australia (Chapter 2);
- Chapter 3 examines the high-level findings of the National Mental Health Commission's (the Commission) *National Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services Report*
- the Government reaction to the Commission's review has been minimal and cautious, which has been a disappointment to many in the mental health sector (Chapter 4);
- Chapters 5 and 6 describe the issues witnesses and submitters raised with the committee throughout its inquiry; and
- a key issue of concern for stakeholders is ensuring the smooth transition of Government mental health programmes into the NDIS (Chapter 7).

Notes on references

1.13 References to submissions in this report are to individual submissions received by the committee and published on the committee's website. References to the committee Hansards are to the proof transcripts.¹¹

Acknowledgements

1.14 The committee thanks the many organisations and individuals who participated in the mental health hearings on 26 and 28 August, and 18 September as well as those that made written submissions. The committee also acknowledges the

9 Commonwealth of Australia 2014-15 Budget, Budget Paper No. 2, Budget Measure: Smaller Government—scoping studies for four operations of government, May 2014, p. 117.

10 Senator the Hon Mathias Cormann, Minister for Finance, media release, 'Further Consultation on Future Ownership Options for Australian Hearing', 8 May 2015.

11 Committee Hansards can be accessed via the committee's website:
www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Health/Health/Public_Hearings.

contribution of all those who have raised mental health issues in the committee's previous hearings.

1.15 In particular, the committee would like to thank the mental health consumers and carers who told the committee of their personal experiences. Your stories demonstrate strength, hope, and courage. They also show clearly that we need to do better in providing care for those with mental health conditions.

1.16 The personal experiences of carers and consumers who spoke at the roundtables held during the committee's hearings on 28 August (Sydney) and 18 September (Brisbane) are included at Appendix 4.