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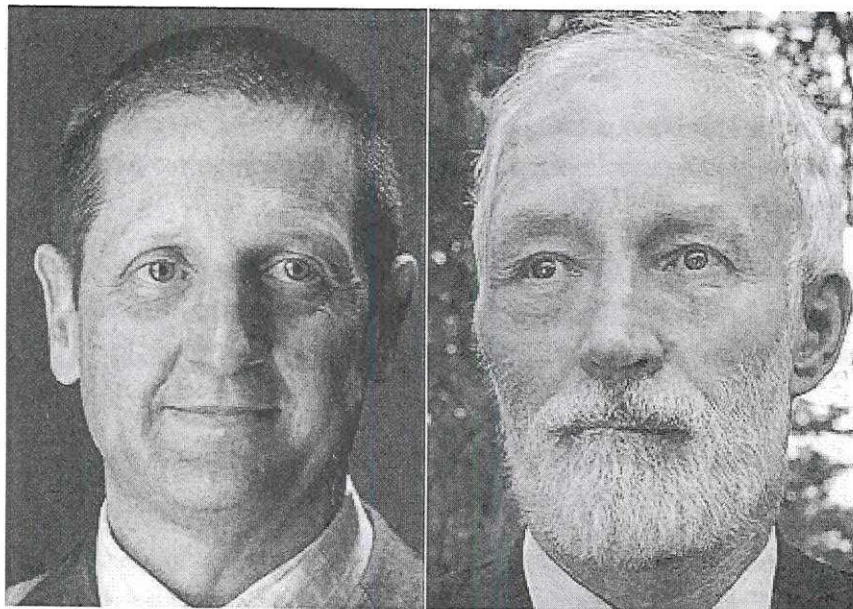
By: Senator Fierravanti-Wells

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## Mental health programs 'tokenistic', not reform

Kate Hagan

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Advisers ... Professor Ian Hickie and Professor Pat McGorry.

THE federal government's handpicked advisers on mental health reform have dismissed a \$113 million package of suicide prevention programs as "tokenistic" and say a functioning mental health system would be more effective.

Professors Ian Hickie and Pat McGorry made the comments after the Mental Health Minister, Mark Butler, yesterday published details of programs to be funded under a suicide prevention initiative promised during the election campaign.

The measures include training for community workers, such as financial counsellors, to identify people at risk of suicide, suicide prevention programs targeting high-risk groups, and an expansion of programs to promote resilience and tackle bullying in primary schools.

But Professor Hickie, the executive director of the Brain and Mind Research Institute and an adviser to Mr Butler on priorities for mental health reform, said the suicide prevention measures represented a scatter-gun approach which the government needed to abandon quickly. "Each of these programs has merit, but what is missing is a central driver of fundamental reform in mental health, and that's the perspective the government has lacked all along," Professor Hickie said.

"[Mr Butler] is listening, but he's got lead in the saddlebags from the previous policy development. As quickly as he and the Prime Minister can move away from that, then for relatively small and

strategic investments, they can make a big difference."

The Australian of the Year and director of Orygen Youth Health, Professor McGorry, who is also part of the working group, said the best suicide prevention strategy would be to have a functioning public mental health system.

"Hardly anyone kills themselves unless they have poor mental health," Professor McGorry said. "Most of them are in dire straits due to psychosis or depression or some other significant mental health problem."

"Governments have been mired in this for the last 10 or 15 years, just throwing little packages of money for a system that's highly dysfunctional."

"We want a redesign of the system, with much more targeted investment where the money's going to do the most good."

Professor Hickie said Mr Butler had correctly identified priority areas for reform - including a co-ordinated approach to helping chronically ill people with mental illness who now receive services from a number of different government departments.

"Millions of dollars are wasted at the state and federal level every year in disorganised service platforms across health and social services," he said. "Those services need to wrap around the person, rather than the myriad of departments where currently about 40¢ in the dollar is lost in administration."

Other priorities included offering more services for young people, including expanding Professor McGorry's early intervention model for those experiencing early psychosis.

"The minister has identified the big areas, now what he's got to do is get away from this tokenistic approach and into the big strategic issues. For that he needs the Prime Minister's support and the support of other ministers, including in social services, employment and housing, to make it happen," Professor Hickie said.

"There's general agreement that \$1.5 billion over four years is needed, which is tiny in the national health budget. Most of it is about capturing wasted money and wasted effort. The money is not that hard - it's a leadership issue, a strategic vision issue."

Mr Butler said he would work with Professors Hickie and McGorry over the next couple of months on options for reform.

"The Prime Minister has been crystal clear that there is more for us to do on mental health, and that mental health is an important priority for her second term."

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