

Dear Mr Holland,

I am responding to the letter you sent to Professor Philip Boyce, the President of the RANZCP, seeking input into the Senate Select Committee on Mental Health.

I am a psychiatrist in 'private' practice, with an academic position as Associate Professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences and Medicine at Bond University. In the 1980s I was the Regional Director of Community Psychiatric Services on the Gold Coast.

There has much debate amongst psychiatrists about the state of Mental Health policy on the psychiatrists email list 'auspsyc'. I enclose links to two articles I have submitted to that list below.

The main points I should like your committee to consider are these:

1. The problems of the Health System in general, and the Mental Health System in particular, are systemic. They will not be fixed by any percentage increase in funding, any new management plan, or any incremental increase in efficiency.
2. A key aspect of the systemic problem is the dual systems of government funding: Federally subsidized Medicare card supported patients seeing doctors (mistakenly called 'private practice') and federally subsidized State Health Departments (called 'public').
3. Any recommendations that your committee makes that leaves this dichotomy intact will be a waste of time.
4. The Medicare card has been a qualified success. It empowers patients. It permits some limited market pressure to encourage doctors to practice in areas of under-supply. It is among the worlds 'best-practice' methods of providing subsidy to health.
5. The State Health departments run health systems based loosely on the National Health Service in the UK. It in turn was derived from the ideas of State Socialism, and feature state ownership of hospitals and salaried health professionals. State socialism has collapsed as a convincing social policy. It fails to adapt to changing needs and manages the mismatch between demand and supply by queues and crises.
6. A dichotomized system in which one side of the dichotomy produces queues and crises leads to those professionals who have the choice moving to the alternative. The effect of this is to bleed the 'public' system of medical leadership, leaving a vacuum that is filled by other less qualified professionals, and doctors from overseas, some of whom prove to have inadequate qualifications. More crises follow.
7. The 'private' system encourages extravagance and waste. The 'public system' leads to queues, crises, and poor quality care.

8. Your committee should recommend:

- That all health services become a federal responsibility.
- That patients be subsidized by the Medicare card when they are admitted to any hospital or community health service.
- That psychiatrists be permitted to employ psychiatric nurses, social workers and psychologists and charge for their services under Medicare to permit leverage of their services to larger numbers of patients than the present 1:1 arrangements.

Yours sincerely,

David Straton

- [Psychoanalysing the Health System](#)
Auspsyc list. 14 December 2003
- [Galileo, Darwin, and the Australian Health System](#)
Auspsyc list. 17th July 2004