

SENATE FINANCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
REFERENCES COMMITTEE

(COAG REFORMS RELATING TO HEALTH AND
HOSPITALS)

SUBMISSION

PREPARED BY SOCIAL WORKERS IN PRIVATE PRACTICE (SWIPP), A
POLICY AND PRACTICE GROUP OF THE AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF
SOCIAL WORKERS (AASW)

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AASW	Australian Association of Social Workers
ATAPS	Access to Allied Psychological Services
Better Access	Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the Medicare Benefits Scheme initiative
DoHA	Department of Health and Ageing
PIR	Post-Implementation Review of the Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the MBS Initiative' May 2009
SWIPP	Social Workers in Private Practice, a policy and practice group of the Australian Association of Social Workers
The Act	Health Insurance Act 1973
The Committee	Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee (COAG Reforms Relating to Health and Hospitals)
The Regulation	Health Insurance Amendment Regulations 2006 (No.3) An amendment to the definition of health service in subsection 3C (8) of the Act.

SUMMARY OF SUBMISSION

This submission briefly addresses (j) under The Committee's *Terms of Reference* (1)

SWIPP calls upon The Committee to request the statistical and evaluative data used to justify the decision to remove specialist mental health social workers from Better Access (as outlined in the 2010-11 Budget) and;

Calls upon The Committee to inquire into the impact of that decision on COAG agreements for *all* states and territories.

BACKGROUND

Better Access was introduced in 2006 as one of the pillars of the COAG endorsed National Action Plan on Mental Health (2006-2011).

This was facilitated via The Regulation (2) which was passed by Delegated Legislation in November 2006. This amended the definition of health services in The Act. (3).

Social work (and other professions) was covered by The Regulation.

Under Better Access approximately 1 100 specialist mental health social workers have provided counselling and clinical assistance to patients referred by their general practitioners for focussed psychological strategies.

SWIPP is opposed to the removal of specialist mental health social workers from Better Access as outlined in Budget Related Paper No. 1.11 Health and Ageing Portfolio (4).

SWIPP calls upon The Committee to request what statistical and evaluative data was used to justify the decision to remove specialist mental health social workers from Better Access.

SWIPP calls upon The Committee to request information on the effects the removal will have on COAG spending and policy.

SWIPP points to the fact the Federal Government's decision was made prior to the completion of a full evaluation of Better Access by DoHA's Mental Health and Chronic Health Division. DoHA is currently conducting such an evaluation. This is only due for completion at the end of 2010.

SWIPP submits the removal of specialist mental health social workers from Better Access is unjustified and pre-emptive given the lack of strong statistical or evaluative data to support such a decision. Further such a removal should not have been included in the Budget prior to the completion of a comprehensive and proper assessment.

In stating this SWIPP points to five outstanding issues which the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs requested the PIR to consider and which are still being evaluated (5) by DoHA. Those being:

- The impact of the initiative on other services
- The types of illnesses (for) which people are receiving treatment
- Whether the initiative can be better utilised to provide services to those with severe mental illness
- Whether the initiative can be better utilised to provide services to specific population groups
- *Whether the initiative is improving mental health outcomes and improving the recovery process for those that access eligible services*

SWIPP notes the Health Minister's recent press release which announced the postponement of the removal until April 1, next year. (6)

However SWIPP remains opposed to and critical of the Federal Government decision to proceed with the removal of specialist mental health social workers from Better Access, albeit delayed until April 1 next year, given the lack of supporting data. In particular the DoHA evaluation.

SWIPP is concerned that the removal of specialist mental health social workers will reduce the *early detection*, treatment and management of people with mental illnesses in the community.

It further points to the fact over 60 percent of Better Access specialist mental health social worker patients live in rural/regional and remote Australia. (7) Further that the national average co-payments for Better Access MBS specialist mental health social worker items are lower than other MBS mental health provider groups. (8)

SWIPP is concerned the removal of specialist mental health social workers will be replaced by more expensive service providers. This is a financial and policy concern for COAG.

SWIPP considers the removal of specialist mental health social workers to be deeply disturbing for those Australians unable to afford the gap payments required by more expensive mental health providers. SWIPP is also concerned some regions and income groups (urban, rural and remote) do not have any/sufficient mental health professionals able to assist in early intervention, preventative mental health assistance currently served by specialist mental health social workers.

SWIPP notes the Federal Government's decision to limit specialist mental health social workers to the ATAPS program. SWIPP is concerned that this program is aimed at more acute, critical mental health patients and therefore does not serve those patients in need of preventative/early intervention assistance who are currently being assisted by specialist mental health social workers under Better Access.

SWIPP strongly questions the rationale for removal of specialist mental health social worker services given the smaller budgetary savings created by such an action. (9) (10) (11).

Notes

(1) Terms of Reference

http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/fapa_ctte/coag_health_reforms/tor.htm

(2) The Regulation

[http://www.comlaw.gov.au/ComLaw/Legislation/LegislativeInstrument1.nsf/0/64E51881274B264ACA25720C001EC3EE/\\$file/0614656A061004EV.pdf](http://www.comlaw.gov.au/ComLaw/Legislation/LegislativeInstrument1.nsf/0/64E51881274B264ACA25720C001EC3EE/$file/0614656A061004EV.pdf)

(3) The Act

http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/hia1973164/

(4)

From 1 July 2010, support for allied health workers, such as occupational therapists and social workers, will transfer from the Better Access initiative to the new ATAPS service stream. The new arrangements will provide a more flexible funding pool for care packages, and increase the role of allied health workers in the provision of new care packages for people with severe mental illness.

Budget Statement – Department of Health and Ageing. Contributions to Outcome 11. p.320

[http://www.health.gov.au/internet/budget/publishing.nsf/Content/2010-11_Health_PB_S_sup2/\\$File/Department%20of%20Health%20and%20Ageing%20PBS.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/budget/publishing.nsf/Content/2010-11_Health_PB_S_sup2/$File/Department%20of%20Health%20and%20Ageing%20PBS.pdf)

(5) PIR p.73

[http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/D7E9963F2C67A94ECA2576F500831403/\\$File/finalpirreport.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/D7E9963F2C67A94ECA2576F500831403/$File/finalpirreport.pdf)

(6)

“....To ensure that future the Better Access reforms are informed by the evaluation, and the detailed design of care packages can be developed in consultation with professional groups, the Government will defer the introduction of the care packages and any associated changes to fee-for-service Medicare arrangements until 1 April 2011. Until then, current arrangements will remain in place. The revised implementation strategy will be cost neutral over the forward estimate..”

Press Release May 19, 2010. Health Minister Nicola Roxon

<http://www.alp.org.au/news/role-social-workers-and-occupational-therapists-providing-coordinated-mental-health-care>

(7) PIR p.18 (and AASW figures)

[http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/D7E9963F2C67A94ECA2576F500831403/\\$File/finalpirreport.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/D7E9963F2C67A94ECA2576F500831403/$File/finalpirreport.pdf)

(8) Op cit PIR P.21

(9) Op cit PIR p.15

(10) Op cit PIR p.17

(11) Op cit PIR p.21