

Administration of health practitioner registration by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA).

08 April, 2011

Dear Senators

I would greatly appreciate some of your time in considering this letter in relation to the Review in to Mental Health in relation to Medicare benefits.

As a practicing psychologist (with a Masters in Counselling Psychology, but not a member of the Clinical College of the Australian Psychological Society) I need to highlight a problem that exists, which is blocking help from MANY psychologists getting to needy recipients.

When the previous Liberal government introduced the Better Access to Mental Health Programme (through then Health Minister Tony Abbott) it introduced a 2-tiered rebate system for clients.

As you are no doubt aware, clients of psychologists have different rebates according to the psychologist they see.

For clients of psychologists who are eligible for membership to the 'Clinical College of Psychologists' they receive \$120.00 rebate OR the psychologist can bulk bill at \$120.00.

For clients of other psychologists who meet the Medicare criteria, they receive \$80.00 rebate, or the psychologist can bulk bill at \$80.00.

You may be aware that the colleges were originally set up as interest groups, not as training colleges.

What has happened is that clients of 'Clinical College' psychologists are waiting many weeks and months, whereas other psychologists often have many vacancies available, due to this artificially introduced difference between psychologists.

The other very important issue is that many clients are not aware of the differences between Clinical College psychologists and other Non-Clinical College psychologists. What they observe is that one group have a higher rebate, with longer waiting lists, which simply put by them, means they must be better than non-Clinical College psychologists. This undermines the profession, and the assistance that can be given to many people, by highly qualified psychologists, who may not be members of the Clinical College. It also decreases the numbers of people being seen, as there are not enough Clinical College psychologists to meet the needs of the community.

Whilst it may seem fair to have 'Clinical College' psychologists get higher rebates, the fact is many 'Non-Clinical' psychologists have equivalent qualifications, but the clients are not going to them because of the difference in rebates.

What this is doing is that many clients are not getting the help they need from trained psychologists, as they feel they can only wait for 'clinical college' psychologists.

In many cases I have a Masters in COUNSELLING psychology, but am not a member of the 'clinical college' – thus despite my specialty in COUNSELLING, many prospective clients will not attend as their rebate is lower. There are many psychologists like this. And if I may be so bold, most clients go to psychologists for Counselling, which would make psychologists with qualifications in Counselling qualified for a rebate equal to 'Clinical College' psychologists.

I know many 'clinical college' psychologists who have 6-8 weeks, even 3 months, waiting lists. However psychologists who have been trained to an equivalent standard, or other psychologists who have had many years of experience in treating clients, are not seeing as many clients, due to the discrepancy.

As mental health is crucial, and to avoid costs going up to treat the problems after they have become serious, it would make sense to offer treatment to clients early. This could be done if the rebates were equal for all psychologists, rather than just members of the 'Clinical College'.

This would help a greater number of Australians to avoid the serious and often debilitating effects of anxiety, depression and other psychological problems.

Four Corners last year (09 August 2010) highlighted some deficiencies in mental health focusing on Mackay. Similar problems exist Australia wide. Limited access to mental health practitioners, often due to finances, exacerbates mental health problems. By expanding the rebates to all practicing psychologists, there would be a much larger number and pool of psychologists who could afford to bulk bill as well.

As highlighted in the programme there are also many people who are hesitant in going to psychologists, but once exposed to others getting support, even open up, and often are prepared to get the assistance they need.

We have heard so often in recent years about the negative, sometimes dangerous and tragic effects, of bullying. Psychologists are experts at assisting people to develop strategies and deal with this practice, but often the people who most need it (younger people, people in the workforce at the receiving end of powerful people bullying) are often the ones who can afford it least.

The economic effects of bullying are huge. In an article in the Australian (28 January, 2010) **BULLYING and harassment in the workplace costs the economy about \$15 billion a year and is not properly addressed in occupational health and safety laws.** In a draft report released yesterday, the Productivity Commission found 2.5 million Australians experienced some aspect of bullying during their working lives.'

The emotional impacts are even more serious (with a number of suicides attributed to bullying making headlines in the last several years)

A Work Outcomes Research and Cost Benefits (2005) research has shown that 6.7 percent of Australian employees in any organisation suffer from clinical level depression each year, and that their attendance and job performance significantly deteriorates. Moreover, around 65 percent of these individuals have not sought any treatment in the previous 12 months and seem to 'bunker in' as a way of coping (Whiteford, Sheridan, Cleary & Hilton, 2005).

In a 7.30 Report Kerry O'Brien interviewed Professor Ian Hickie he stated that 'Firstly, only four out of 10 Australians with a mental health problem gets any service' and that *'.. Early intervention is critical. Seventy-five per cent of mental health problems start before the age of 25. You've got to get in early and prevent the problem'...*

In response to the mental health initiative being set up in 2007 Mr Kennett said he expected thousands more would seek help under the new scheme in the coming months. "I'm not surprised at all by the rush. Many people have been carrying their illness and not seeking help because they can't get access or they can't afford it."

In recent years quite a number of media and sport personalities have publicly admitted to suffering from depression. Even politicians (such as John Brogden, Andrew Robb, Geoff Gallop, Bob Hawke) have admitted to suffering from depression. It is wonderful to have the courage to go public, but they are able to **afford** psychological or psychiatric treatment, whereas there are many people (employees or others not working), who cannot afford treatment. By increasing the rebate clients can get back, or allowing all psychologists to bulk bill at an affordable or even reasonable rate, the numbers of people getting assistance would increase dramatically, especially at an earlier stage, stopping the depression, etc. from getting to a worse or more dangerous stage.

I would be happy to discuss examples of work done by Non-Clinical College psychologists that have greatly helped clients who have not previously been helped by psychiatrists, clinical college psychologists, and mental health institutions.

I feel it would be best if psychology services were funded at an equal level, allowing the community equal and quicker access. To have the discrepancy between psychologists is counter productive to the profession which exists to help people in need.

As such it may be that psychologists other than those members of the clinical college have their rebates raised to the clinical college level – or if necessary, decrease the ‘clinical college’ rebate (for example to \$100.00 and raise the non clinical rebate to the same amount, levelling out the rebate and not increasing by too great an amount the Medicare rebates required over the next few years.

I would greatly appreciate it if you could give some consideration to this letter as part of your submission.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need further information. I would be pleased to expand on any of the issues.

Thank you.

Yours Sincerely,