



# Mental health policy 'fails to show results'

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NATIONAL attempts to improve mental healthcare have been challenged by a trio of health experts, who claim it is unclear whether patients have benefited from the \$8 billion in new money allocated to improving the sector by state and federal leaders since 2006.

In a scathing critique of current policy, the three experts say mental health's share of the overall health budget is shrinking instead of rising. This is the reverse of the outcome sought by peak mental health organisations, which have long argued that the mental health share of the budget — now 5 per cent — should better reflect the 13 per cent share of the overall disease burden caused by mental illnesses.

The experts say a lack of centralised definitions and control means the current initiatives appear to be being dissipated in a "patchwork of jurisdictional investments, rather than a co-ordinated national effort to address the agreed priorities".

The three experts — Sebastian Rosenberg, a senior lecturer at the University of Sydney's Brain and Mind Research Institute; John Mendoza, former chairman of the National Advisory Council on Mental Health; and Lesley Russell, a former adviser to Julia Gillard when she was shadow health minister — make their arguments in an article published online yesterday by the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

They say there is no clear reason why Western Australia should dedicate to promotion, prevention and early intervention nearly a quarter of the \$483.9 million it was allocated by

the Council of Australian Governments under the 2006-2011 National Action Plan on mental health, when Queensland spent "almost nothing" on the same activity. "Similarly, WA spent four times as much as South Australia on Action Area 3 (participation in the community and employment), and the ACT allocated 20 per cent of its effort to workforce development, to which Victoria committed less than 1 per cent," they wrote.

Mr Rosenberg told *The Australian* that despite the billions poured into mental health by successive state and federal governments, and despite the \$2.2bn allocated in the most recent federal budget, there was "a dearth of information about outcomes for people with a mental illness".

A spokeswoman for Mental Health and Ageing Minister Mark Butler said spending on mental health-related services had increased by an average of 4.8 per cent per Australian between 2004-05 and 2008-09, and the \$2.2bn package was "the single largest investment in mental health in the nation's history".

Mr Butler helped to launch a report on people with psychotic illness late last year, which found significant improvements in their health and wellbeing, including a one-third fall in voluntary hospital admissions for mental health reasons over the past 12 years.

Allan Fels, chairman of the National Mental Health Commission, said Mr Rosenberg and co-authors had written "a very sensible article" and the lack of data and accountability were "a key reason" why the commission was established. "We are particularly interested in providing information about what's working well in the system, and what's not working," Professor Fels said.

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