

7th July 2011

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Committee Members,

Re: Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee proposal to abolish the two-tiered Medicare rebate system for psychologists.

I am writing this letter to express my objection about the Committee's proposal to change the two tiered Medicare rebate system for psychologists. I currently access specialist mental health care under the Better Access to Mental Health Care initiative with a clinical psychologist specialising in mental health disorders at Northwest Psychological Services in Melton, Victoria.

Clinical psychologists are trained to provide service for some of the most complex mental health issues. My clinical psychologist is able to offer me individually tailored strategies. She has been able to flexibility adapt and combine approaches as a result of her broad, thorough and sophisticated understanding of various psychological therapies.

If I were unable to receive the current level of specialist intervention for my mental health issues that my clinical psychologist provides, I feel that the quality of my care would be compromised.

Already the government has reduced the number of sessions available to people with a recognised mental health disorder to a maximum of 10 sessions in any calendar year. Eliminating the two-tiered rebate system goes against the decision-making of mental health consumers, with many people likely to need specialist clinical psychology treatment.

At Northwest Psychological Services the clinical psychologists are dedicated to providing Bulk Billed consultations to all consumers receiving service. The demographics of Melton are challenging. The population is expanding at an exponential rate and there are a very limited number of medical and mental health services per person. Melton is a low socio-economic area with young families making up a good proportion of the community. If the two-tiered Medicare rebate for psychologists is eliminated the Bulk Billing arrangement at Northwest Psychological Services will have to be discontinued. Given the significant cost of living, I would not be able to afford a gap payment. I could no longer receive the specialist clinical psychology treatment that has been integral to my well-being.

The proposal to eliminate the two-tiered rebate ignores the needs of people with significant mental health disorders living in low socio-economic communities. It also ignores evidence from psychological research which supports the effectiveness of clinical psychology for complex mental health needs. Reviews in the area of mental health care are important, however, they should not negatively impact existing programs in mental health care that have been shown to work effectively.

The new proposals to abolish the two-tiered Medicare rebate for psychologists are not good enough and need to be revised as soon as possible.

Consumers with significant mental health issues experience a vulnerable psychological state and want to develop trust in a psychologist who has specialist training and skills and who has worked extensively in the field of mental health. Taking a hard line on mental health consumers is not the answer. Consumers who live in low socio-economic communities and face the ongoing challenges of the cost of living value their ability to access specialist mental health care under a bulk billing arrangement.

Consumers with mental health issues face many quality of life impairments and they do not need the added pressure and stigma associated with being unable to access and/or afford an incredibly important specialist service. The new proposal creates more barriers for people with a mental health disorder, preventing them from receiving the specialist and complex intervention they require.

I urge the Senate committee to reconsider the proposal to eliminate the two-tiered Medicare rebate for psychologists immediately. This action would ensure that all consumers have the opportunity to access specialist mental health services with an appropriately qualified specialist clinical psychologist. I also urge the Senate committee to consider the integral importance of continued access to Bulk Billed services in communities such as Melton, Victoria where the population is rapidly expanding and mental health needs are complex and access to mental health services is limited.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Plotzza