

Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH AND AGEING PORTFOLIO

Additional Estimates 2011-2012, 15 February 2012

Question: E12-006

OUTCOME 11: Mental Health

Topic: BETTER ACCESS PROGRAM

Written Question on Notice

Senator Xenophon asked:

Due to the change in the Better Access program, only 10 appointments will be covered by Medicare as opposed to 18. I note that the Government has introduced a phase-in period until December 2012:

- a) Can the department explain what happens when someone with serious mental health issues is no longer able to afford treatment?
- b) What plans does the Government have in place to ensure people can still access treatment after the phase-out period?
- c) Did the Department take any advice from Patrick McGorry on this reduction?
- d) What was Professor McGorry's advice?
- e) Will there be any monitoring or assessment undertaken of the effect of this reduction in services?
- f) If not, why not? Wouldn't such data be important in forming future policies or advice?
- g) If so, how will that information be used?

Answer:

- a) The Better Access initiative was introduced to address low treatment rates for high prevalence mental disorders such as depression and anxiety – particularly presentations of mild to moderate severity where short term evidence based interventions are most likely to be useful. The initiative was not designed to provide intensive, ongoing therapy for people with severe and persistent mental illness.

People whose condition is not only severe but also persistent generally require longer term treatments from a multidisciplinary state based mental health service or psychiatrist, where 50 sessions can be provided per year through the Medicare Benefits Scheme.

The Australian Government's Delivering National Mental Health Reform 2011-12 Budget package commits \$571.3 million to services for people with severe mental illness – including a new measure to link people to the range of support services they need through the Partners in Recovery initiative and the expansion of proven community support services like the Day to Day Living and Personal Helpers and Mentors programs.

The Government has also announced \$200 million over five years (2011-12 to 2015-16) for a National Partnership with states and territories. This will assist people with severe and persistent mental illness and complex care needs who need stable accommodation and support. It will also improve presentation, admission and discharge planning and support for people with a mental illness who frequently present at emergency departments.

- b) The reintroduction of 'exceptional circumstances' up to 31 December 2012 provides time for allied mental health professionals and consumers to adapt to the new arrangements and time for the new mental health services announced in the 2011-12 Budget to be able to build capacity to effectively respond to the needs of people with more complex needs.

c) and d)

The Hon Mark Butler MP consulted with the Mental Health Expert Working Group as to what would comprise a balanced mental health reform package. Professor McGorry was a member of the Mental Health Expert Working Group. The Mental Health Expert Working Group did not make any decision about changes to the Better Access initiative. Decisions made regarding the 2011-12 Budget package were a matter for the Government.

e), f) and g)

The Department of Health and Ageing will continue to monitor the uptake of Better Access, and the implementation of new and expanded services to support people with more severe and chronic illness.

In addition, the Ten Year Road map will set out an agenda for long-term reform of the mental health system, and the main steps involved in reaching this goal. The Roadmap will guide future reform, as the Budget measures are bedded down and their effects evaluated.

The National Mental Health Commission has been established by the Government to increase transparency and accountability in the mental health system. The Commission will play a significant role in terms of monitoring the mental health system through the development of a National Report Card on Mental Health.