

Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH PORTFOLIO

Budget Estimates 2017 - 2018, 30 May 2017

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OUTCOME: 2 - Health Access and Support Services

Topic: 2017 - 18 Budget Initiatives

Type of Question: Written Question on Notice

Senator: O'Neill, Deborah

Question:

Telehealth for psychological services

Can the Department explain what is meant by 'improving access to psychosocial services'? What is an 'eligible area'? Funding is set at \$9.1 million across the forward estimates – how many people living in regional, rural and remote areas will this assist? Can the Department explain how it reached the funding figure allocated in the Budget? This initiative is contingent on people living in these areas having access to a computer and a reliable internet services – like the NBN. What if a person with a mental illness hasn't got a computer, or is computer illiterate for instance? What happens to that person?

Who determines the access to video consultants – is this the GP or psychologist? What about continuity of care? What if the client is accessing the services of a particular psychologist and wants to take up the video consultant option – what will this mean if I am unable to access the same psychologist? In the Budget's explanatory notes it states the following - "This will mean people living in regional, rural and remote Australia will get the same access to psychologists as those living in major cities". How is the Department measuring this statement? What evidence is the department using to substantiate this statement?

Answer:

There is a distinction between psychological services that include the range of focussed psychological therapies (FPS) that are used by allied mental health professionals and covered by Medicare and will also be included under the new telehealth items, and psychosocial services, which generally refers to a broader suite of social and emotional supports such as case management and counselling that are available through other Government-funded programs including the Partners in Recovery program and the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

This measure recognises that there is significant shortage of psychological services in regional and rural Australia and will improve access to psychological services by allowing people in rural and regional Australia to claim a Medicare rebate for videoconference consultations with a mental health professional without the time and expense of travelling to a larger regional centre or major city.

From 1 November 2017, telehealth mental health items will be available to people residing in Monash Modified Model (MMM) regions four to seven. The MMM is a classification system that categorises metropolitan, regional, rural and remote areas according to both geographical remoteness and town size.

The \$9.1 million in funding announced reflects assumptions about the likely take-up of telehealth services which is estimated to generate growth in the Better Access initiative by approximately eight percent. It is conservatively estimated that on average, between 3,500 to 4,500 additional people living in regional, remote and rural areas will seek assistance through this measure in a calendar year.

For patients located in a telehealth eligible geographical area, it is anticipated that the eligibility requirements will remain consistent with existing MBS requirements for the Better Access initiative.

If a person is currently accessing psychological services under Better Access they will continue to be able to do so. It is intended that existing providers that are approved to deliver Better Access through face to face consultations will also be able to deliver telehealth services.

National guidelines and resources are being developed by the Australian Government Department of Health through a targeted consultation process that will involve key stakeholders and technical experts as appropriate to support the effective implementation of the measure. Post implementation, the Department will utilise Medicare data as appropriate to monitor the uptake of the new telehealth items.