

Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH AND AGEING PORTFOLIO

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2010-11, 20 October 2010

Question: E10-058

OUTCOME 11: Mental Health

Topic: MENTAL HEALTH

Written Question on Notice

Senator Siewert asked:

What alternatives will be available to those living in urban fringe and rural areas receive focused psychological strategies for mild to moderate depression and anxiety, under Better Access, if there are minimal psychologists practicing in the area who bulk bill?

Answer:

The Department of Health and Ageing administers a number of mental health programs that are designed to complement the Better Access initiative, particularly in areas where Medicare services are not readily available.

The Access to Allied Psychological Services initiative (ATAPS) funds Divisions of General Practice to allow GPs to refer patients who have been diagnosed as having a mental disorder of mild to moderate severity to an allied health professional to provide short term focused psychological strategies services.

ATAPS is available across the country and primarily treats people with common mental disorders such as anxiety and depression and targets hard to reach groups, including population groups such as people living in rural and remote communities. ATAPS is intended to assist people who may not otherwise have access to psychological services, including those on a low income. Around 89% of clients do not make any co-payments, with the remaining 11% paying between \$5 to \$30 per session.

In addition to psychologists, a number of other allied health professionals are eligible to provide services under ATAPS including mental health nurses, appropriately trained occupational therapists and social workers, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers.

In addition to the services already provided under the ATAPS program, as part of the 2010-11 Budget, \$58.5 million over four years will be provided to deliver flexible care packages to better support up to 25,000 people with severe mental illness who are being looked after in primary care.

The Commonwealth is also providing funding of up to \$108 million from 2006-07 to 2013-14 under the Mental Health Services in Rural and Remote Areas (MHSRRA) Program to Divisions of General Practice, Aboriginal Medical Services and the Royal Flying Doctor Service to deliver mental health services by appropriately trained mental health care workers, including psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, mental health nurses, Aboriginal health workers and Aboriginal mental health workers.

The MHSRRA Program provides funding for mental health professionals in communities that would otherwise have little or no access to mental health services. The program is designed to address inequities in access to the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) by targeting areas where access to MBS subsidised mental health services is low. The MHSRRA Program also addresses workforce shortage issues by providing flexible employment models suited to local needs and conditions. This includes flexibility to accommodate geographically, culturally and linguistically diverse populations, such as indigenous communities, in rural and remote areas of Australia.