

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH AND AGEING PORTFOLIO

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2010-11, 20 October 2010

Question: E10-100

OUTCOME 11: Mental Health

Topic: STAFF RECRUITMENT IN MENTAL HEALTH

Written Question on Notice:

Senator Boyce asked:

- a) Why does the Department have serious problems with staff recruitment and retention especially in the area of community mental health care?
- b) Could the cause of this problem be in any way connected to confusion about what existing community mental health services are meant to do?

Answer:

- a) The Commonwealth is not directly responsible for the recruitment and retention of the community mental health workforce. State and territory governments are the main employers of this workforce. The Commonwealth does, however, contribute to health workforce recruitment, including the mental health workforce, through education and training.

The Department of Health and Ageing has undertaken a number of activities to assist in supporting the mental health workforce. This is in recognition that mental health workforce supply, distribution, recruitment and retention is an issue of national significance, and efforts to better support this workforce can be made through a number of avenues. Activities the Department has been involved in include:

- Contributing to the development of a draft National Mental Health Workforce Strategy and Plan by the Mental Health Workforce Advisory Committee (MHWAC), a subcommittee of the AHMAC Health Workforce Principal Committee. The Strategy and Plan are currently being finalised for consideration by the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council. In addition to the Strategy and Plan, MHWAC has also produced a number of innovative tools and resources, such as the Mental Health Professional Online Development (MHPOD) platform and online learning modules, to facilitate continuing education and learning for mental health workers. The Australian Government has contributed \$0.59 million in financial support to this project.

- Under the COAG *National Action Plan on Mental Health (2006 – 2011)*, the Department has implemented and funded a number of initiatives to assist with increasing the capacity of the mental health workforce, including for benefit in community mental health settings. Such initiatives include:
  - The *Mental Health Nurse Incentive Program* which provides non-Medicare Benefits Schedule incentive payments to community based general practices, private psychiatrist services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care Services and Divisions of General Practice who engage mental health nurses to assist in the provision of coordinated clinical care for people with severe mental disorders. Support provided under this initiative targets patients with severe mental health disorders during periods of significant disability. The Program, funded on an ongoing basis, will provide \$88 million over four years from 2010-11 to 2013-14.
  - The *Mental Health Services in Rural and Remote Areas* Program which funds eligible organisations in rural and remote areas to engage allied and nursing mental health professionals to provide mental health services to clients with a diagnosable mental illness. These services include those provided by social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists, mental health nurses, Aboriginal health workers and Aboriginal mental health workers. The Program aims to increase services delivered through a flexible model of care, with medical practitioner oversight, in rural and remote areas throughout Australia. The Program, funded on an ongoing basis, will provide up to \$108 million from 2006-07 to 2013-14.
  - The *Improving the Capacity of Health Workers in Indigenous Communities* initiative which provides \$20.8 million (over five years) to train Aboriginal Health Workers, counsellors and clinic staff in Indigenous specific health services to better identify and address mental illness and associated substance use issues in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; and to better recognise the early signs of mental illness and make referrals for treatment where appropriate.
  - The *Mental Health in Tertiary Curricula* initiative which provides \$5.6 million (over five years) to tertiary institutions address health workforce issues in mental health. Under this initiative, several accreditation bodies have been funded to review their professional accreditation standards in relation to mental health. In addition, a number of universities have been funded to increase the mental health content of their undergraduate curricula in nursing, medical and allied health degrees.

In addition, the *Additional Education Places, Scholarships and Clinical Training in Mental Health* initiative provides \$103.5 million (over five years) to expand the capacity of the health system to provide mental health services. The initiative provides support for scholarships and additional places in universities for mental health nurses and clinical psychologists; expansion of clinical training options for trainee psychiatrists; and provides junior doctors with exposure to clinical training in the mental health area. Responsibility for the additional higher education places under this initiative rests with the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

Health Workforce Australia (HWA) was established to manage the majority of initiatives announced as part of the 2008 COAG commitment to health workforce. HWA aims to address the challenges of providing a skilled, flexible and innovative health workforce that will meet the needs of the Australian community, with mental health identified as an area of priority.

- b) The Department is not able to comment on this matter.