

Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH AND AGEING PORTFOLIO

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2011-2012, 19 October 2011

Question: E11-175

OUTCOME 11: Mental Health

Topic: MENTAL HEALTH - BETTER ACCESS

Written Question on Notice

Senator Boyce asked:

- a) Has the Department received a lot of complaint and criticism of the proposals to cut funding to the Better Access program as on November 1, 2011?
- b) What has been the Department's reaction to this feedback from those who know this program so well?
- c) Has there been any consideration given to amending, postponing or withdrawing the changes?

Answer:

- a) Ministerial correspondence relating to the changes to the Better Access initiative announced in the 2011-12 Budget have been sent to the Department of Health and Ageing in line with the usual departmental processes for such correspondence.

As at 31 October 2011, the Department had received approximately 1,600 pieces of ministerial correspondence about the changes to Better Access.

b) and c)

The Delivering National Mental Health Reform 2011-12 Budget package provides an investment of \$1.5 billion over five years in both health and community services, and a structure to continue reform in the long term. In line with the Government's fiscal rules and strategy, the new investments in the package are offset by genuine savings, which include a redirection of \$580.5 million over five years from the Better Access program to new and expanded measures.

The Department commenced work on implementing the Better Access 2011-12 Budget measures (changes to the allied mental health and GP Mental Health Treatment Medicare items) following the Budget announcement.

The *Health Insurance (General Medical Services Table) Regulations 2011* (GMST regulations), which give effect to the four new time-tiered GP Mental Health Treatment Plan Medicare items and changes to Medicare rebates, was registered on the Federal Register of Legislative Instruments (FRLI) on 25 October 2011. The GMST regulations were tabled the House of Representatives and the Senate on 31 October 2011.

The *Health Insurance (Allied Health Services) Amendment Determination 2011 (No. 2)*, which gives effect to the cap on allied mental health services was registered on the FRLI on 26 October 2011 and was tabled in the House of Representatives and in the Senate on 31 October 2011.

The changes to the Better Access initiative were introduced on 1 November 2011 in line with all changes to the Medicare Benefits Schedule.

Fact sheets on the changes to Better Access were distributed to peak professional organisations such as the Australian Medical Association and the Australian Psychological Society in the first week of November 2011. These fact sheets were also published on the Department's website.

A letter enclosing copies of the fact sheets was also sent to all providers registered with Medicare Australia who provide Better Access services in the first week of November 2011.

The Department notes that the Senate Community Affairs Committee Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services presented its final report on 1 November 2011. The Terms of Reference for the Senate Inquiry included the examination of changes to the Better Access initiative. The Government is currently considering this report.