

# 2022-23 PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION

**BEYOND BETTER ACCESS: A VISION FOR BETTER MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES**

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## BEYOND BETTER ACCESS: A VISION FOR BETTER MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

Clinical psychologists are experts in mental health care and have completed postgraduate qualifications with a focus on the assessment, treatment and management of complex mental health conditions.

### Clinical Psychology and Medicare

Clinical psychologists help people with the most complex mental health issues access the most expert care as was the intent of the initial Better Access model.

Because of the limited number of sessions available under the BA system prior to the pandemic, the types of interventions and outcomes that can be achieved with clients are necessarily limited. Almost all empirically validated treatments for mental disorders require more than the maximum allowed of 10 sessions in a calendar year. This current funding arrangement may allow effective treatment of some patients with focal high prevalence disorders. For other clients with more severe and complex low prevalence presentations, less time may be spent on comprehensively assessing the client in terms of history-taking and formulation, with the results that treatment planning and implementation may be incomplete or focused on reduction of acute symptoms. There are well-validated treatments available for serious mental disorders such as schizophrenia, other psychotic disorders, bipolar disorders and more recently, personality disorders, with the complexity requiring up to 40 sessions of intervention. There is robust evidence that these patients can significantly benefit from psychological interventions to overcome their mental health problems (see Babcock & Paulik, 2020).

The pandemic has shown the extraordinary benefits of telehealth and improved mental health outcomes for Australian who receive 20 sessions, whilst further demonstrating the inefficiencies and barriers to care that the current GP referral process entails.

#### ACPA calls for:

- **The permanent availability of up to 20 clinical psychology sessions, required to effect change in patients, particularly for the complex mental health issues seen by clinical psychologists**
- **An expansion of the Stepped Care Model that provides up to 40 MBS funded session per year for complex conditions, which currently covers Eating Disorders, to other complex conditions that present a massive health and economic burden (Personality Disorders, Psychotic Disorders and severe Mood Disorders)**

- **Removal of the requirement for the six session GP review, unless specially requested by the GP, which will lead to a significant cost saving in the MBBS budget.**
- **In the longer term, a review of the need for GP Mental Health Plan, potentially replaced with a GP Medicare item for psychology assessment, which will lead to a significant cost saving in the MBBS budget.**

Better Access has done little to address the inequitable distribution of psychological services throughout the country. Most private practices are in urban locations and few in rural or remote locations (see Productivity Commission Summary, 2019). The implication of this is that general medical practitioners outside of the main urban areas have few if any practitioners to whom then can refer, and regional and rural communities miss out on critical mental health care.

**ACPA calls for:**

- **Government to extend to clinical psychologists its scheme to waive university debt to attract doctors and nurse practitioners to rural areas, thereby contributing to a more equitable distribution of clinical psychology services**

## **Clinical Psychology and Tertiary Training**

Although the massive need for greater provision of mental health care has been recognised, Australian need greater numbers of clinical psychologists to cater to the need. Higher standards of training for the psychology workforce are critical to safe and effective mental health care. Expansion of the number of clinical psychology students will make the greatest contribution to the mental health workforce, bringing expert knowledge of the latest evidence-based assessment and intervention approaches.

**ACPA calls for levels of funding for psychology postgraduate professional programs that cover the true costs of training and a doubling of the number of places. That is**

- **an increase from 1,000 places to 2,000 places**
- **an increase in the Commonwealth contribution per place from \$13,250 (Funding Cluster 2) to \$27,000 (Funding Cluster 4; as per medicine, dentistry, veterinary science).**

**ACPA also calls for the implementation of paid registrar positions within the public mental health sector which will provide the incentive for graduates to start their careers in the public sector.**