



MEDICARE SUBSIDISED PRIMARY CARE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

FACT SHEET

APRIL 2008

Mental health disorders are a leading cause of burden of disease and it is vital to provide effective front-line support through Medicare to ensure identification, early intervention and treatment of mental disorders.

In any given year, approximately 18 per cent of Australian adults experience a mental disorder, while in any given six month period, 14 per cent of children and adolescents experience a mental disorder. Not all people with mental health disorders need to be hospitalised but benefit from care provided in the community.

Medicare Subsidised Primary Care Mental Health Support

Under the *Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the Medicare Benefits Schedule* (Better Access) initiative psychiatrists, paediatricians and general practitioners can refer patients for intensive, short-term Medicare subsidised mental health services. Depending on their needs, patients are eligible for up to 12 (or 18 in exceptional circumstances) individual and/or group allied mental health services per calendar year.

In the first 14 months of operation of the Better Access initiative, more than 726,000 people living with mental illness across Australia have accessed around 2.7 million Medicare subsidised primary care mental health services. These services have been provided by over 30,000 psychiatrists, general practitioners, clinical psychologists and other allied mental health care professionals (registered psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists).

On average, people with an assessed mental health disorder referred to an allied mental health professional are receiving four to five treatment sessions, with the number of sessions utilised determined by the treating clinician and based on clinical need.

With these alternative primary care treatment services now available, psychiatrists can see additional new patients and be more readily accessible to treat patients with more complex and long term mental health care needs.

Medicare data indicate that around 79 per cent of Medicare claims for Better Access services were for urban areas. This reflects the higher concentration of population and providers in these areas but also highlights the difficulties that Australians living in rural and remote areas have in accessing primary care mental health services.

Bulk billing rates and cost to patients

Bulk-billing rates vary between professional groups. GP mental health services average over 90 per cent nationally compared with rates of around 30 per cent for services provided by psychiatrists and clinical psychologists. However bulk-billing rates for psychiatrist and psychologists are higher in rural and remote areas than in urban areas. Patient co-payment rates also vary between professions.

The average co-payments for psychiatrist and clinical psychologist services are slightly more than \$65 and \$28 respectively. These are higher than GP average co-payments which range from \$16 to \$19 depending on the service being provided.

Future Directions for Primary Mental Health Care

Better Access is one of a number of initiatives providing primary mental health care which will be further strengthened by the introduction of GP Super Clinics. In April 2008, the Minister for Health and Ageing announced a number of measures to improve access to mental health services:

- a trial of telephone-based support in rural areas through the Access to Allied Psychological Services program;
- better support and referral pathways for GPs managing patients at high risk of suicide;
- an increased focus on areas and populations in need under the Access to Allied Psychological Services program;
- an increase in total funding for Access to Allied Psychological Services by \$20 million over five years; and
- the creation of a National Advisory Council on Mental Health, to provide the Rudd Government with independent advice from experts on mental health reform.

Other complementary programs include the Mental Health Services in Rural and Remote Areas initiative and the Mental Health Nurse Incentive Program.