



unbound
minds

31st August 2023

Dear Committee Chair

Re: Submission to the inquiry into the equity, accessibility and appropriate delivery of outpatient and community mental health care in New South Wales

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this incredibly important inquiry. Every human being, irrespective of who they are, where they're from, what they look like or what they can afford, deserves access to comprehensive, competent, and empathetic mental health care. Unfortunately, the existing mental health care system in New South Wales does not deliver on this.

We work with many wonderful people who sadly narrate stories about struggle, frustration and despair with the existing mental health system. These people, struggling already with mental health concerns, have detailed their views about a fundamentally broken system that is indifferent to their needs and is incapable of providing timely, quality, affordable and consistent care.

Our submission intends to offer opinions and suggestions about several Committee terms of reference. We aim to actively contribute to the creation of policies that will favourably impact the lives of people who rely on the mental health care system through a combination of research, lived experiences, and best practices.

1. Medicare Rebates for Therapy

- **Background:** The Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) provides specific rebates for psychological treatments under certain item numbers. This has been a great first step. However, as mental health demands have grown and diversified over the years, there have been growing concerns about whether the current rebate structure, both in amount and scope, adequately caters to the needs of the population.
- **Insufficient Rebate Amount:** The current Medicare rebate for psychological services is simply not reflective of the true cost of providing high-quality mental health care. Many patients are left with a significant out-of-pocket expense after consultations, which can act as a deterrent to seeking and continuing necessary treatment.
- **Session Limitations:** The current system allows for a maximum of 10 rebated sessions per year. While this might suffice for some individuals, many with moderate to severe mental health conditions require more consistent and long-term support. Restricting rebates to 10 sessions can severely hinder the therapeutic process by disincentivising people to continue treatment once the rebate has been exhausted.

- **Exclusion of Provisional Psychologists:** Provisional psychologists, despite undergoing rigorous training and supervision, are not currently covered by the Medicare rebate system. This omission reduces the number of mental health care professionals available under the scheme and reduces accessibility to competent care.
- **Recommendation:** We urge the Senate to advocate for a review and appropriate increase of the Medicare rebate amount to reflect the true costs of mental health care more adequately. Moreover, a reconsideration of the session limit and inclusion of provisional psychologists within the rebate system can greatly enhance the accessibility and affordability of mental health services in NSW.

2. Lack of Medicare Rebates for Psychological Assessments:

- **Background:** Psychological assessments play a pivotal role in understanding and potentially diagnosing specific mental health conditions. These assessments can involve a combination of interviews, standardised tests, and observations. The results often guide and tailor therapeutic interventions to meet individual needs.
- **Financial Barriers:** Currently, many essential psychological assessments are not covered by Medicare rebates. The exclusion places a significant financial burden on individuals, with many unable to afford the cost associated with comprehensive evaluations. This can lead to inadequate or misinformed treatment if the psychologist doesn't have a complete understanding of the patient's mental health.
- **Duty of Care vs. Financial Accessibility:** Psychologists are bound by a professional and ethical duty of care to ensure they fully understand a patient's presentation. Developing a full understanding, particularly of a complex mental health presentation, can require a full assessment and many clinical hours of work. Some assessments require at least 10-14 hours of clinical work. The current lack of Medicare rebates puts psychologists in a challenging position, where they must balance this duty of care with an understanding that the financial strain of assessments can be prohibitive for many patients.
- **Recommendation:** We strongly advocate for the inclusion of psychological assessments in the Medicare rebate system. This step would not only make these vital services accessible to a broader population but would also allow psychologists to uphold their duty of care without placing undue financial stress on the individuals they serve. Moreover, a comprehensive assessment can lead to more targeted and effective therapeutic interventions, potentially reducing the long-term cost burden on the healthcare system.

3. Collaboration Between Psychologists and General Practitioners in Medication Management:

- **Background:** Currently, only psychiatrists and general practitioners (GPs) have the authority to prescribe medications to help treat mental health concerns in Australia. However, considering the multidisciplinary nature of mental health care, the potential for psychologists – who often have consistent and in-depth contact with patients – to collaborate in the prescription process deserves exploration.

- **Benefits of Collaborative Care:** Particularly in areas where psychiatric services are limited, a collaborative approach can also expedite the process of getting patients the medicinal support they need alongside therapeutic interventions. In addition to this, psychologists often conduct detailed psychological assessments and engage in regular therapy sessions, providing them with a comprehensive understanding of the patient's mental state. Their insights can be invaluable when considering medication management.
- **Recommendation:** We propose a pilot program wherein selected psychologists, after undergoing specialised training, collaborate closely with GPs in the medication management process. Evaluating the outcomes from this program can guide broader policy decisions regarding expanding such collaboration across NSW.

In an era where the significance of mental health is better understood yet still underserved, the challenges highlighted in this submission represent urgent calls to action. Equity, accessibility, and quality in mental health care are not just policy imperatives but societal necessities. By addressing the gaps in the system we can pave the way for a more inclusive, responsive, and resilient mental health framework for all New South Wales residents. Together, we have the opportunity to shape a future where mental health care is a right, not a privilege.

Thank you for considering this submission.

Sincerely,



Justin Khoury
Chief Executive Officer
Unbound Minds