

THE PSYCHOLOGY FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA

(Incorporated in New South Wales)

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14 April 2014

Submission to the National Mental Health Commission.

Re: THE 2014 NATIONAL REVIEW OF MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMMES AND SERVICES

The Psychology Foundation of Australia is a grouping of research-oriented university Schools of Psychology that was created to promote high standards in the education of psychologists and a scientific basis for professional practice.

We respond below to the call for submissions regarding the National Review of existing mental health programmes and services. In particular our comments address the following terms of reference as they pertain to the discipline and profession of psychology:

- the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of programmes, services and treatments;
- funding priorities in mental health and gaps in services and programmes, in the context of
- the current fiscal circumstances facing governments;
- existing and alternative approaches to supporting and funding mental health care;
- mental health research, workforce development and training

Our starting point is that the goal of mental health services should be to **deliver the most effective treatments to those who need them most.**

In terms of workforce training and registration, this goal points to the need for **evidence-based** assessment and treatment.

In terms of mental health services, this goal points to the need to maximise the **availability** of effective services to the community.

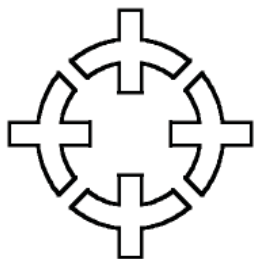
Unfortunately, the current system of training, registration and deployment of psychologists does not meet either of these requirements adequately. Too few Australians with mental health needs are able to access any services at all, and of those who do access services, too few receive effective, evidence-based treatment delivered by appropriately trained practitioners.

The main **problems**, as we see them, are as follows:

1. Current registration standards are well below relevant international standards. They allow psychological services to be delivered by practitioners who have not been adequately trained in evidence-based assessment and treatment, in particular those with only 4 years of university training. The 4-year undergraduate degree provides excellent training in the discipline, methods and conceptual basis of psychology, but it does not provide professional, vocational training. The additional two years of supervised practise that leads to registration in this case has often been unregulated and provides no guaranteed grounding in evidence-based practise. In Australia, as in

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the rest of the world, professional education and training within Psychology is provided at the postgraduate level, building on the foundation provided by the undergraduate degree. This foundation in the core discipline is what distinguishes Psychology from other professions dealing with mental health. It underpins all later training in applications and allows practitioners with a strong Psychology background to evaluate the scientific credentials and credibility of proposed therapeutic methods.

2. The provision of Medicare rebates for services provided by 4-year trained psychologists is likely to be inefficient. Since their post year 4 professional training has not been required to focus on evidence based practice, many will use non evidence-based procedures. It is our view that the Medicare rebate should target only the evidence –based methods. Medicare support has also encouraged psychologists to set up in private practice, where they tend to provide therapy for clients in socioeconomically advantaged areas, with on average less severe problems. At the same time there has been an exodus of well-trained psychologists from the public sector.

3. In 2004 the Commonwealth reduced funding for postgraduate professional training programs in universities by almost 60%. These programs are highly efficient and focus on evidence-based professional practice, but at the current funding level universities are running them at a loss and cannot expand their intakes.

In light of fiscal constraints, we suggest a coordinated, potentially revenue-neutral **solution** to these problems, as follows:

1. Increase the requirements for registration to 6 years of university training, in line with international standards and also the recommendations of the Psychology Board of Australia and the decades-long recommendation of the Australian Psychological Society.
2. Reduce Medicare funding for private practice, and use this funding to support salaried positions in the public sector, located in areas of greatest need.
3. Restore the pre-2004 level of funding for postgraduate professional courses in psychology, to allow universities to expand their intakes to compensate for the phasing-out of registration for 4-year graduates.

We would be happy to discuss our proposal and to help maximise the contribution of psychology to mental health in Australia.

Signed on behalf of the members of the Psychology Foundation of Australia.

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