



Social workers unconvinced by responses to Senate Estimates on Mental Health

The AASW is deeply concerned at the responses to Senate Estimates hearings on the Budget changes to Social Work services under the Better Access to Mental Health Services program.

Despite positive meetings with the Minister for Health and Ageing, her senior staff and officials, responses to questions in today's Senate Estimates hearings did not show a strong understanding of the needs of low income and disadvantaged people with mental health issues, or for the services currently provided by specialist social workers in the Better Access scheme.

The AASW is extremely disappointed that Government officials stated that social workers would be removed from the program on 1 April 2011, and only psychologists will remain eligible to offer Medicare Rebates for mental health services.

"The Government again failed to provide a reason for social workers and OTs to be excluded from the program while psychologists remain able to provide services under Medicare. The move will increase costs to patients and to the Government, it will not provide clients with a choice of professional and it will remove services to low income and disadvantaged Australians, particularly those in rural and regional areas," said **AASW CEO Kandie Allen-Kelly**.

- Social workers and OTs make up only 4% of the expense on allied health in the better Access program;
- The Medicare scheduled fee for seeing a social worker is \$83.10 The scheduled fee for seeing a clinical psychologist is 138.40;
- 63% of social workers 'bulk bill' some or all of their clients (for \$70.65)

Highly qualified and experienced social workers, currently providing clinical services in the Better Access scheme, have made it clear to the AASW and to the Government that they are not going to transfer to the Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS) program, as case managers, where they are unable to use their clinical skills.

"We are profoundly disappointed that the Government still seems not to have heard that social work clinical services in the Better Access program are well targeted to low income and disadvantaged Australians. It appears we will need to continue to send the Government the message that we will not be removed from the program without a fight," said **AASW President Professor Bob Lonne**.

The AASW has today written to Minister Roxon to request and urgent meeting to discuss these issues.