

AASW response: 17 April 2015

National Mental Health Commission: Report on the National Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is pleased with the release of the National Mental Health Commission's Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services. The report is comprehensive, covering extensive areas of service delivery in this sector in which many social workers practice. It includes many interlinking issues and recommendations, the consequences of which will need closer examination.

The AASW will consider the full report and its recommendations in due course.

Better Access program

The Better Access program is an area of importance for accredited mental health social workers. There has been extensive examination of it in the report with some significant proposals. The Australian Psychological Society (APS) shares many of the positions and views with the AASW. However there are some issues that apply to the social work profession specifically and some recommendations in the report which require further clarification.

Rebate equity

Significantly the Commission has recommended that rebate equity be addressed at the time of the next indexation increase. This is a significant issue for which the AASW has been advocating for some years.

Realign MBS benefits levels between allied health professionals: on the next indexation of MBS items weight the first component of the increase to align MBS benefits for social workers and occupational therapists with those for registered psychologists, with any remaining elements of indexation then being distributed equitably across Better Access items (current differential is about 12 per cent or \$8: parity would take up the first 0.9 per cent of any future indexation increase and cost \$1.8 million).

We support strongly the recommendation to extend to 16 sessions intervention for people considered to be suffering from serious mental illness. The AASW also supports the recommendation about the GP Mental Health Plan being an option as this often leads to significant duplication as agreed by the APS.

Service delivery in rural areas

The Commission's report recommends that new psychologists are only able to provide services in rural areas until 'practice endorsement' and is silent on the issue for social workers in relation to new graduating practitioners. However the AASW does have a view that the current Better Access program does not encourage service delivery in rural areas and we are open to possible incentives to rectify this matter.

The AASW supports increasing the workforce to other disciplines where these disciplines can demonstrate additional mental health specific knowledge and skill, and believes strongly in a multi-disciplinary model.

The following recommendation requires careful consideration as it is silent on social workers. However it is encouraging to note that the AASW has strict criteria for accrediting social workers that includes strong evidence of mental health knowledge and skill.

Examine cashing out Better Access benefits paid for services provided by registered psychologists who do not have an additional endorsed qualification and distributing those funds on a weighted population basis to regional purchasers for psychological services on a salaried or sessional basis.