

Submission  
No 35

**INQUIRY INTO EQUITY, ACCESSIBILITY AND  
APPROPRIATE DELIVERY OF OUTPATIENT AND  
COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN NEW SOUTH  
WALES**

**Organisation:** Australian Association of Psychologists Inc (AAPi)

**Date Received:** 31 August 2023

---

# Australian Association of Psychologists incorporated (AAPi)



**Australian Association of Psychologists Inc – submission to the equity, accessibility, and appropriate delivery of outpatient and community mental health care in NSW Inquiry**

Dear Committee,

The Australian Association of Psychologists Incorporated (AAPi) appreciates the opportunity to provide commentary to the Committee on equity, accessibility, and appropriate delivery of outpatient and community mental health care in NSW. AAPi is the leading not-for-profit peak body representing all psychologists Australia-wide.

We address the terms of reference relevant to our members who are psychologists who work with individuals who experience mental ill health across the nation in addition to specific information from our NSW membership group.

In addressing the concerns of our members regarding equity, access, and appropriate delivery of outpatient and community mental health care in NSW, we must draw attention to the larger issues present in the mental health sector which contribute to a deleterious flow on effect on the public system. We include many practical solutions to the issues of access and equity in NSW for mental health care and treatment.

### a) Equity of Access to Outpatient Mental Health Services

Accessing outpatient mental health services in NSW is not equitable or accessible for all in the state. We firmly believe that equitable access to outpatient mental health services is a fundamental right for all individuals. Disparities in access can exacerbate mental health challenges and hinder overall well-being. The current demand on the public system is significantly impacted by the lack of affordable and accessible services in the private sector. In the recent review of the Medicare Better Access Scheme, cost was cited as the number one barrier to accessing treatment.<sup>1</sup> Resource constraints and workforce shortages in psychology can impact the availability of continuous care, particularly in regional and rural areas.

To address the issues of equity and accessibility in the public sector, we recommend broader reforms and implementation of targeted initiatives to reduce barriers, particularly for underserved communities. This includes

---

<sup>1</sup> Pirkis, J., Currier, D., Harris, M., Mihalopoulos, C., Arya, V., Banfield, B., . . . Brophy, P. (2022). *Evaluation of Better Access*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.

recommendations from the February 2023 McKell report<sup>2</sup>, which states that the mental health emergency will persist unless out-of-pocket costs are lowered, and the workforce is increased. This includes increasing the Medicare rebate to \$150 for the clients of all psychologists and allowing provisional psychologists to work under the Medicare system. Allowing provisional psychologists, who are in the last phase of supervised training, to offer rebates under Medicare is a pragmatic solution that can significantly enhance access to mental health care. This approach could introduce approximately 8,000 mental health care professionals to the workforce, representing a 22% increase that could occur rapidly with a resultant increase in access to services for residents across NSW.

### b) Navigation of outpatient community mental health services

Navigating the mental health care system can be overwhelming for clients and their caregivers. Relying on the public sector to deliver community mental health services is a large financial undertaking for state governments. We urge the NSW Government to prioritise adequate funding for primary prevention and early intervention. The economic and societal benefits of this are well documented.

AAPi remains concerned about the Federal Government's decision to halve the subsidised psychology sessions under the Medicare Better Access scheme and we urge the reinstatement of the additional 10 sessions. Left at the current maximum of 10 sessions per year, the public sector will continue to experience increased pressure, and the community will be largely underserved. The provision of additional subsidised psychological therapy sessions through the Medicare system for those with complex mental health needs is a noteworthy recommendation of the McKell report that aligns with the goal of improving navigation and ensuring that clients and carers can access appropriate care.

### c) Capacity of State and other community mental health services, including rural, regional and remote New South Wales.

The availability of mental health services, especially in rural, regional, and remote areas, is a critical concern. We advocate for the expansion of state

---

<sup>2</sup> The McKell Institute. (January 2023). *Under Pressure: Australia's Mental Health Emergency*. The McKell Institute.

and community mental health services to ensure access for all residents of New South Wales. This can be achieved by supporting and encouraging psychologists to work in regional and remote locations through:

- Financial incentives
- Training opportunities, and professional development programs
- Rural loading
- Covering relocation expenses
- Subsidised housing
- Reducing education debt to those who commit to a period of practice in rural and remote areas is imperative.<sup>3,4</sup>

AAPi also advocates for specific employment programs of provisional psychologists within these communities so that they can complete their training in a more supported employment situation. A recent Australian study<sup>5</sup> has shown that medical students who participated in a 12-week placement in a small rural town were around three times more likely to work in a similar-sized community after graduating, and those who combined a 12-week placement with a two-year training program were around seven times more likely to work in a small rural or remote location.

Expanding access to career pathways for psychology students by reinstating the 4+2 supervised pathway to general registration and increasing Commonwealth Supported Places for psychology students can play a pivotal role in mobilising the mental health workforce in rural, regional, and remote New South Wales.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Schofield, D., Fletcher, S., & Fuller, J. (2015). Financial incentives for rural and remote health: results of a systematic review. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 23(1), 18-29.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, T. G., Chakraborty, S. P., & Gray, C. S. (2019). Recruitment and retention of health professionals in rural Canada: A systematic Review. *Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine*, 24(3), 85-95.

<sup>5</sup> McGrail MR, Nasir BF, Chater AB, *et al.* The value of extended short-term medical training placements in smaller rural and remote locations on future work location: a cohort study. *BMJ Open* 2023; 13: e068704. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2022-068704

<sup>6</sup> The McKell Institute. (January 2023). *Under Pressure: Australia's Mental Health Emergency*. The McKell Institute.

#### d) Integration between physical and mental health services, including in rural, regional and remote New South Wales

A holistic approach to healthcare is essential for comprehensive well-being. We recommend fostering collaboration and communication between physical and mental health service providers. The proposals put forward in the McKell report<sup>6</sup>, such as increasing the Medicare rebate for all psychologists and expanding career pathways for psychology students, are promising steps towards creating a more interconnected and comprehensive healthcare system that addresses both physical and mental health needs.

#### g) Benefits and risks of online and telehealth services

Online and telehealth services have proven to be valuable tools for increasing access to mental health care, especially in remote and underserved areas. However, potential risks such as privacy concerns and technological barriers must be addressed. AAPi acknowledges that telehealth is not always the most appropriate option and we urge the committee to review our recommendations for boosting the rural and regional workforce.

AAPi recommends expanding the eligibility of provisional psychologists to provide services under Medicare to support the growing role of telehealth in mental health care. This can potentially enhance access, especially in remote areas where traditional in-person services may be limited.

#### h) Accessibility and cultural safety of mental health services for First Nations people, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), LGBTQIA+ people, young people, and people with disability

To promote accessibility and cultural safety, it is imperative to develop culturally sensitive mental health services. Collaborating with First Nations leaders, CALD community representatives, LGBTQIA+ organisations, and disability advocates is crucial to ensure that services are tailored to the unique needs of these communities. Additionally, hiring diverse mental health professionals from a variety of backgrounds, reinstating diverse study and training pathways for psychology that encourage diversity in the profession, and providing cultural competency training can enhance the quality of care delivered.

AAPi strongly recommends the need for increased Medicare rebates for the clients of psychologists, which can help reduce out-of-pocket expenses and make mental health services more accessible for First Nations people, culturally and linguistically diverse individuals, LGBTQIA+ people, young people, and people with disabilities.

Thank you for considering our submission, and we look forward to working collaboratively in the future.

Sincerely,



Amanda Curran

Chief Services Officer

Australian Association of Psychologists Inc

Website [www.aapi.org.au](http://www.aapi.org.au)