

Media Releases



BETTER MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES FOR AUSTRALIA

On 10 February this year in Canberra, my colleagues and I on the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) committed to reforming the mental health system in Australia. Since then, the Commonwealth has been discussing this matter at officials' level with the States and Territories.

As a demonstration of the Commonwealth's commitment in this area, I am pleased to announce that the Commonwealth will contribute \$1.8 billion in new funds, with a commitment of around \$500 million in the fifth year and ongoing, for the five-year action plan that is being developed. Both levels of government have a responsibility to improve services for people with a mental illness. Mental health services have always been something in which both the Commonwealth and the States are involved.

There are several major gaps that need to be addressed. These include the need for more primary health and clinical services, areas that have traditionally been funded by the Australian Government through Medicare. But there also needs to be a significant increase in supported accommodation for people with a mental illness living in the community and improvements in emergency and crisis services, and hospital and prison care. These are areas where States and Territories have historically had responsibility for delivery.

The package I am announcing today comprehensively addresses the key shortcomings in mental health services in those areas for which the Australian Government has responsibility. It is my hope that the States will be in a position to match what the Commonwealth is proposing and focus their efforts in particular on addressing the supported accommodation needs of mentally ill people who, with appropriate accommodation and support, can live in the community, as well as other State and Territory priorities.

We are providing:

- a major increase in clinical and health services available in the community and new team work arrangements for psychiatrists, GPs, psychologists and mental health nurses;
- new non-clinical and respite services for people with mental illness and their families and carers;
- an increase in the mental health workforce; and
- new programmes for community awareness.

We have listened to the community and the health professions, and are responding to many of the concerns that have been raised about the lack of services available for people with a mental illness, their families and carers. These initiatives will need to be complemented by an investment from States and Territories in the areas of supported accommodation, improvements to hospital and emergency and crisis services and the care of people in prisons with mental illness.

Reform of mental health services cannot be achieved through a quick fix – it will require a sustained contribution of this magnitude from both the Commonwealth and the States and Territories to ensure long-term fundamental improvements in services for the mentally ill. Together, our investment in mental health will support reform of the system, and ensure that it remains sustainable into the future.

A major increase in clinical and health services

We are going to support many more health services in the community for people with a mental illness. We know that our hardworking psychiatrists and GPs find it difficult to see all the people who need to see them. We are today announcing a new team work approach to mental health services in the community, with psychologists and mental health nurses able to work alongside GPs and psychiatrists to offer more services to those with mental illness.

From 1 November 2006, the Medicare Benefits Scheme will be restructured to better support the work of psychiatrists. GPs and psychiatrists will be able to refer patients with a mental illness to psychologists, and these services will now be eligible for a Medicare rebate. This means that appropriately trained psychologists will be able to play a much greater role in Australia's mental health system. The Government will also provide funding for GPs and psychiatrists to employ mental health nurses in their practices, who will be able to follow up and monitor patients thoroughly, ensuring that more people get access to the services that they need.

This new investment will complement the new mental health telephone services that will open over the next few years as the COAG national health call centre network is rolled out across Australia.

In rural areas, we will be providing more funding for mental health nurses and allied health services to provide treatment for people with mental illness.

One of the problems that providers of services have when helping the mentally ill is knowing how to help people who have both a substance abuse problem and a mental illness. The Government is providing new funding for drug and alcohol treatment services so that people working in these services are better skilled in dealing with people who suffer from both a mental illness and a drug or alcohol addiction.

New non-clinical services for people with mental illness, their families and carers

The Government will fund a number of other services in the community to help people with a mental illness, their families and carers help themselves and better manage the illness. Lifeline will receive additional funding for its telephone service. Funding under the National Suicide Prevention Strategy will be increased so that more locally based programmes can be provided, including programmes that support families and communities who are affected by suicide or suicidal behaviour.

I have been particularly concerned about the number of cases where people don't have anyone to help them get the assistance and services they need. People with a severe mental illness often need help to find accommodation, organise payments they have to make, attend appointments and receive their entitlements under Government programmes.

I am pleased to announce today that the Australian Government will make a major investment to help people better manage their day to day living by funding 900 new personal helpers and mentors nationwide for people who suffer from severe mental illness.

This will be complemented by additional funding to the non-government sector to provide more living skills programmes for people who suffer from severe mental illness who are unlikely to get jobs. These programmes will, for example, help people to cook, shop and enjoy social outings.

Many people with a mental illness are able to work and Australia can do better at helping them get back into and remain in employment. The Government will strengthen employment support arrangements for people who suffer from mental illness by increasing the places in the Personal Support Programme and providing more support to people with a mental illness who are in employment, but are at risk of losing their jobs.

We also want to make sure that we are providing as much support as we can to help young people who are experiencing problems with their mental health to stay and finish school. The Government will provide funding to help an additional 6000 young people with a mental illness each year through the Youth Pathways Programme. This programme helps young people in secondary schools stay in education and make the transition to employment successfully. Families and carers of people with mental illness deserve access to the best support available. As the Senate Select Committee on Mental Health acknowledged in its recent report "in order to effectively fulfil their roles, families and carers need adequate support in a range of areas".

I am pleased to announce that the Government will provide funding for over 650 new respite places. These places will include overnight respite and day respite services for up to 15,000 families a year. Priority access to these places will be given to elderly parents who live with and care for children (including adult children) who have a severe mental illness or an intellectual disability.

These places will be in addition to the new respite programme for older carers announced in the Commonwealth's 2004-05 Budget. This programme was to be matched by the States and Territories. I understand that all States and Territories, except NSW, have signed a funding agreement with the Commonwealth. However, so far, after nearly two years, the States have only drawn down \$10 million of the \$72.5 million that the Commonwealth has made available.

Clearly this has not resulted in the full number of new respite services on the ground that we committed to fund back in the 2004-05 Budget. I urge my colleagues in the States and Territories to implement this programme as quickly as possible. It is essential that governments relieve the pressure on older Australians who have dedicated their lives to the care of a child with a disability.

New funding will also be provided for local mentoring and recreational programmes to support families, children and young people affected by mental illness. Recognising that mental health problems often first occur in the 15-24 year age group, there will be a new range of supports for young people. The Government will also provide funding to help parents and school communities identify and respond to children at risk of mental illness.

An increase in the mental health workforce

The Government understands that our health workforce is the key to good services. I am announcing today that from January 2007 my Government will fund over 400 additional mental health nursing places and over 200 clinical psychology places a year.

We will also be funding work to ensure that there is a greater emphasis on mental health issues in university courses on health.

New programmes for community awareness

The Government will provide new funding for community awareness, particularly targeted at helping people understand the connections between drug abuse and the development of mental illness. Over three-quarters of dependent methamphetamine users suffer from poor mental health. There is also increasing evidence to show that there are links between cannabis use and the development of mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. The Commonwealth will continue to pursue with the States and Territories the desirability of tougher, more consistent drug laws.

For indigenous communities, the links between substance abuse and mental illness can be particularly difficult to identify and manage, and more funding will be provided to assist health workers in those communities to recognise the early signs of mental illness and make referrals for treatment where appropriate. To further promote community awareness and to bring together organisations that are involved in the mental health field, the government is also providing an increase in funding to the Mental Health Council of Australia to support its role in promotion, education and research and advice to the Australian Government on mental illness in Australia. Mental health will also be made a research priority to ensure that research funded through the National Health and Medical Research Council can help us better understand the causes of mental illness, and help in finding cures. The Government will involve professional groups, key consumer organisations and the non-government sector in the design of the detailed arrangements of these new services. The costs of individual initiatives will be included in the Australian Government's Budget in May.

We need to get the mental health system in Australia right. We do not want to fail people who deserve and need our help. I am looking forward to working with the Premiers and Chief Ministers to deliver a package at COAG that does justice to the scale of the need we have identified and gives Australia a mental health system of which we can all be proud.

05 April 2006