6 June 2019

**Psychologists urge action to close mental health service gaps**

Thousands of Australians vulnerable to mental health disorders are falling between the cracks because they lack access to affordable treatment and care options, according to Australia’s peak psychology body.

An estimated 45 per cent of all Australians experience a mental illness in their lifetime, but less than half will access treatment.

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) President Ros Knight said while the Government’s increased focus on mental health was encouraging, the mental health needs of a significant number of Australians were not being met under current Medicare arrangements.

“The introduction of Medicare support for psychology service delivery 13 years ago was a very positive step, but this welcome approach needs to be strengthened and improved to ensure people can access and afford the right services at the right time,” Ms Knight said.

Representing the largest mental health workforce in Australia, the APS is recommending a number of changes to the mental health system with the release of its *White Paper: Vision for psychological services within Medicare Australia.*

The proposed changes include:

* More sessions for more serious mental health disorders
* More early intervention, assessment and group therapy sessions
* Sessions for family, parents, carers and support people
* Expansion of tele-health services in rural and metropolitan areas
* Assessments to differentiate dementia from mental health disorders
* Support for parents of children with a mental health disorder
* Universal access to interpreters for clients

APS CEO Ms Frances Mirabelli said that the recommendations contained in the White Paper arose from extensive collaboration across the psychology profession to develop a clear vision and response to the Government’s review of the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS), “the first opportunity in more than a decade to recommend an appropriate, future-focused Medicare system of benefit to all Australians”.

**Psychologists urge action to close mental health service 'gaps' (cont.)**

“Every day, members of our profession work to improve people’s lives and to benefit community. We know from the people we help, what works for who and when, and how to address the mental health crisis gripping our nation,” Ms Mirabelli said.

“What we are asking the Government to do is to strengthen and improve MBS-funded psychological services to address service gaps, ensure the highest and best use of psychology and psychologists within our community, and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the mental health care system.

“While preventative services are helping the most ‘at risk’ in our community, and acute services address and care for the most unwell, the mental health needs of the ‘missing middle’ section of our community are not being met.

“Vulnerable groups, including those living outside our cities and children and people with a mental health disorder or episode, all risk a decline in their mental health due to reduced options for treatment outside of acute and specialist care. This gap can and needs to be closed.

“Our recommendations are evidence-based, maximise beneficial outcomes for clients and the community, increase equity across the health system and are the logical next steps to evolve and improve the current model of psychological services to what the Australian community needs and deserves,” Ms Mirabelli said.

Ms Mirabelli added that the benefits to the nation added to a “compelling case for change” in terms of reduced rates of suicide, lessening the impacts of mental ill-health on individuals, families and the community, reduced avoidable health, law enforcement and justice system costs, and improved workforce and economic contribution.

The APS has also released its *Response to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health*, in which it outlines 16 priorities for reform to the broader mental health system in Australia.

Key recommendations include: developing school psychology services; addressing the role of childhood experiences in mental health; embedding trauma informed care in mental health services, and amending psychology services within the Medicare Services Benefits Scheme.

Ms Knight said that too many Australians with mental health conditions are experiencing considerable distress, social exclusion, lost productivity and premature death.

“To achieve real improvements in mental health and reduce the social and economic burden, we need more than financial investment.  We need access to treatments that work,” Ms Knight said.

**Journalists can obtain a copy of the APS White Paper or arrange an interview by contacting**

**Rebecca Matthews on 0435 896 444, or email** [**media@psychology.org.au**](mailto:media@psychology.org.au)**. Find the APS Media team on Twitter:** [**@AustPsych**](https://twitter.com/austpsych?lang=en)**.**

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*The APS is the largest professional organisation for psychologists in Australia, representing more than 24,000 members. The APS is committed to advancing psychology as a discipline and profession. It spreads the message that psychologists make a difference to people’s lives, through improving psychological knowledge and community wellbeing.*