

Mental health 'blowout'

Adam Cresswell, Health editor | July 21, 2007

A KEY advocate of mental-health reform has called for an urgent rethink of the federal Government's scheme to expand access to psychologists, as new figures show costs are blowing out and services are not going to those who need them most.

Ian Hickie, the psychiatry professor who helped to lobby for the reforms, said the cost of the scheme -- originally forecast at an average of \$100 million a year over five years -- was mounting at double that rate.

However, the higher spending was not buying quality care.

The figures show the new scheme is being used more by lesser-trained psychologists and counsellors than the better-trained clinical psychologists who were intended to be involved.

Professor Hickie, executive director of the Brain and Mind Research Institute at the University of Sydney, called for an immediate review.

The scheme was turning into "Medicare as usual", in that most services were going to women aged from 24 to 54, and more urbanised areas instead of the rural, outer-urban areas where they were most needed, he said. "These services have always been densely concentrated in the harbour suburbs of Sydney, the eastern suburbs of Melbourne and the northeastern suburbs of Adelaide," Professor Hickie said.

"It's only the figures in the last two months that should really be ringing alarm bells in the Department of Health. Those bells are certainly ringing in the wider mental-health community.

"The PM's intent was great; the program is falling down in the delivery."

The Government needed to urgently review the program's implementation and to examine the rate of bulk-billing by psychologists, the out-of-pocket expenses patients were facing, and the distribution of services across states and regions, by patient gender and by age, he said.

The "Better Access" scheme was introduced on November 1 last year. It was meant to make mental health treatment more accessible by greatly expanding the ability of patients to claim a Medicare rebate for treatment by a psychologist.

Medicare statistics show that although the Government allocated \$34 million for the scheme from November until June 30 this year, Medicare spent far more -- \$95.1 million by May 31.

Just \$68.4 million was originally allocated for the program for the whole 2007-08 financial year, suggesting it is running at nearly treble the expected rate.

The figures show that GPs provided 48,047 consultations under the scheme in May.

Clinical psychologists provided 42,407, at a cost to Medicare of \$110 each. But that was dwarfed by the 84,318 consultations by lesser-trained psychologists, who get a \$75 rebate.

Professor Hickie said affordability was a problem as the psychologists' professional body recommended members charge patients \$192 an hour, leaving patients more than \$80 out of pocket.

A spokesman for Parliamentary Secretary for Health Brett Mason said early indications were that the percentage of mental-health services provided in urban areas as compared with rural and remote locations under the scheme was "broadly the same as for GP consultations generally".