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PO Box 1505, APPLECROSS WA 6953
<https://www.amhp.org.au/>
ABN: 32 464 608 187

12th May 2020

Hon Greg Hunt
Minister for Health
Parliament House
CANBERRA

Re: Proposal to extend the Mental Health Workforce

Dear Mr Hunt,

I write to you in my capacity of Leader of the Australian Mental Health Party (AMHP). Previously we have had many fruitful discussions in my former capacity as President of the Australian Association of Psychologists (AAPi). My colleague, Michael Pointer, and I have previously discussed with you the Medicare arrangements for Psychologists, and specifically, the Medicare Two-Tier rebate to that professional group. My purpose today is quite different, however, as I implore you to consider the plight of those recovering from the Covid-19 virus, and community recovery in general.

As you will appreciate, the recovery period to this virus will require an “all hands on deck” approach by mental health workers, irrespective of their professional associations and registration bodies. Psychologists represent a workforce of some 30,000, but to presume they are all available for the recovery effort is erroneous. In reality, only around half this number are practitioners, others being engaged in the public sector, academia and research - not to mention those whose provisional status precludes them from Medicare providership.

While I applaud your government’s extension to Medicare to allow bulk billing telehealth services, the use of this technology is very much a “second best” alternative for face-to-face interventions. Most of the psychology workforce is located in capital cities, with few face-to-face services extending to rural and remote areas. I encourage you to consider that, although during the pandemic, services warrant telehealth, the recovery period will be post-pandemic, thus warranting face-to-face services (if possible).



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For this reason, I ask you to consider funding the services of non-registered yet credentialed mental health workers - social workers, mental health nurses, psychotherapists and counsellors. Doing so would swell the mental health workforce some four fold. Further, there is a greater propensity to extend these services to rural and remote areas. Accredited mental health workers are credentialed by agencies such as the Australian Medical Association (AMA), the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), the Australian Counsellors Association (ACA) and the Psychotherapists and Counsellors Federation of Australia (PACFA), to name a few. All members are governed by professional codes of ethics overseen by respective professional associations.

These association members have but two choices in their service to the Australian community - either to work for free (as volunteers) or to charge private fees (thus disadvantaging clientele, and rendering themselves non-competitive to others who can bulk-bill). There is no doubt, clients will gravitate toward the free service (however overwhelmed) if available.

I appreciate your government is concerned that precedents set during this crisis might lead to tough decisions about how long (and to what intensity) crisis funding can continue. But, certain “snap back” arrangements have already been established for the “Jobkeeper” and “Jobseeker” schemes, and the same may be applied to this recovery proposal.

I ask that you approach this proposal in the spirit of bipartisanship already demonstrated by your government. You have transcended politics to forge many exceptional programs geared toward managing this crisis, and in that same vein, the AMHP desires a bipartisanship of professional associations all effecting a “level playing field” in our endeavour to service the communities requiring these services. Please consider this proposal, and call on 0412000080 for clarification. I look forward to an efficient and comprehensive mental health service during this important time.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P.J. Stevenson'.

Paul J. Stevenson OAM
Party Leader

Australian Mental Health Party