



Purpose

Evaluation of the initiative to improve the Medicare Benefits Scheme to ensure more equitable access to psychosocial supports.

The Issue

- The Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the Medicare Benefits Schedule initiative (Better Access) has been running since November 2006 and takes the form of a series of item numbers on the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS). The MBS lists the services for which the Australian Government provides a rebate to consumers to assist them in meeting the costs.
- In 2022, Melbourne University was commissioned to evaluate and review the Better Access program. The final report is available in full [here](#).

Background

Some of the key recommendations discussed in the report include:

- Additional psychological therapies could be added to the list of approved therapies under Better Access, providing that they meet National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Level 1 or 2 evidence standards.
- The additional 10 sessions should continue to be made available and should be targeted towards those with complex mental health needs.
- GPs should be supported to refer to the most appropriate providers within Better Access and to a broader range of services outside of it.
- The mental health treatment plan should be retained but should be standardised, simplified and used to help GPs understand the needs of individual consumers and work collaboratively with other providers to meet these needs.
- The appropriate level for schedule fees should be determined in a standardised, transparent way.
- Other options to increase affordability that sit within or outside the MBS should also be explored (e.g., bulk-billing incentives, loadings on specific item numbers, practice incentive payments, service incentive payments, and blended funding models).
- Telehealth options should continue to be monitored to ensure they are achieving their maximum effect.
- Dedicated family/carer item numbers should also be considered as a means of providing more holistic care.

Please refer to the Summary and Conclusions section of the report for a comprehensive list of all recommendations. The final report is available in full [here](#).

Consumers of Mental Health WA (CoMHWA)

Commonwealth Government Response to date

- Announcement of the reduction of MBS subsidised psychology visits from 20 to 10 per year effective 1st January 2023.
- Increasing flexibility for group therapy MBS items effective 1st November 2022.
- Announcement of a Mental Health and Equity and Access Forum held in Canberra on 30th January 2023.
- Announcement to establish and operate two independent national mental health lived experience peak bodies – one representing consumers and the other representing carers, families and kin.

CoMHWA's Position

1. CoMHWA appreciates the need for improvement to the Better Access program and holds concerns in relation to inequity of access for:
 - People whose needs are deemed 'too complex'.
 - Those people who need more support than the 10 session cap.
 - Consumers who would benefit from holistic, peer-based support or counselling not currently covered under MBS.
 - The ongoing lack of access for those in regional and remote locations.

The need for extended support, packages of multidisciplinary support, reducing out-of-pocket costs, accessibility are real causes for concern.

Consumers and their representative organisations need time, information, and space to consider these issues and input to potential reform directions.

2. CoMHWA welcomes the establishment of a national mental health consumer lived experience peak body. This is a historic acknowledgement of Lived Experience wisdom and expertise, one that is the result of decades of unfunded advocacy and activism from a range of organisations and individuals across the States and Territories.

CoMHWA advocates that the establishment of the national consumer peak body must incorporate a federated-body model which enables a representative alliance of voices from each state and territory peak.

CoMHWA's Action

- CoMHWA as part of the National Mental Health Consumer Alliance (all State and Territory consumer peak bodies) made written submissions to the relevant Ministers for more inclusive representation of consumer voices in discussing reforms to the Better Access program.
 - Two Alliance members attended the Better Access Roundtable held on 30th January.
 - CoMHWA CEO has been invited to a meeting with Assistant Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, later in the month.
- CoMHWA and the Alliance have written to the relevant Ministers stating that the establishment of the national consumer peak body must incorporate a federated-body model.

Have your say

CoMHWA is dedicated to representing your views on these reforms. To have your say, please fill out our survey [here \[hyperlink\]](#), or get in touch with our Systemic Advocacy Team at sysadvocacy@comhwa.org.au.

