



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

Mr Ben Mullings
ben@psyber.net.au

Dear Mr Mullings

Thank you for your correspondence of 23 August 2012 to the Minister for Mental Health and Ageing, the Hon Mark Butler MP, regarding changes to the number of allied mental health services available under the Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (Better Access) initiative. The Minister has asked me to reply on his behalf.

The 2011-12 Budget changes to the Better Access initiative, which took effect from 1 November 2011, included reducing the number of rebates available for allied health services from 12 (up to 18 in 'exceptional circumstances') to 10 for individuals each calendar year.

The Australian Government acknowledges that reducing the number of allied mental health services for which people can receive a Medicare rebate has caused some concern and has listened to these concerns.

On 1 February 2012, the Minister for Mental Health and Ageing, the Hon Mark Butler MP, announced that the Government will be reinstating the additional six allied mental health services available under exceptional circumstances from 1 March 2012, for a limited period up to 31 December 2012.

The standard number of allied mental health services for which an individual can receive a Medicare rebate will continue to be 10 services per calendar year. However, for the 2012 calendar year individuals will be able to receive up to an additional six allied mental health services under exceptional circumstances. This means that eligible individuals can receive up to 16 services where exceptional circumstances apply.

Although Better Access was neither designed nor intended to provide intensive, ongoing therapy for people with severe and persistent mental illness, the Government acknowledges that there are some people with more complex needs who are using the services provided under the Better Access initiative for care and support.

The Government also recognises that some of the new mental health services announced as part of the Delivering National Mental Health Reform 2011-12 Budget package need time to build further capacity before they are able to provide care and support to people with more complex needs or people with severe and persistent mental illness.

The reintroduction of exceptional circumstances up to 31 December 2012 provides time for allied mental health professionals and consumers to adapt to the new arrangements and time for the new mental health services to be able to build capacity to effectively respond to people with more complex needs.

Individuals will continue to be able to receive Medicare rebates for 10 group therapy services per calendar year, on top of their individual allied mental health services during the 2012 calendar year and beyond. GPs can also continue to refer those people with more severe ongoing mental disorders to Medicare subsidised consultant psychiatrist services, where 50 sessions can be provided per year, or state/territory specialised mental health services.

To help make psychiatrist services available in more areas, from 1 July 2011 the Government is providing new Medicare rebates for video psychiatrist consultations for patients living in regional, remote and outer metropolitan areas. GPs, specialists and other health professionals will be provided with financial incentives to help deliver these online services and funding will also be provided to support training and supervision for health professionals.

The Government has provided, through the largest mental health investment in the nation's history, a \$2.2 billion investment over five years from 2011-12 to drive fundamental reform in Australia's mental health system. Implementation of this investment is being informed by extensive engagement with experts, service providers and consumers and carers.

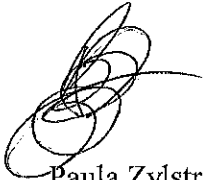
The changes to Better Access enable the Government to deliver a package of mental health services that better targets and supports some of the most disadvantaged people in our community and rebalances investments across new and innovative services that address mental illness at all stages of life. The Government has delivered on its commitments to these new services, including by:

- developing the 15 new **headspace** sites announced in October 2011, and announcing another 15 in August 2012. The average funding each existing **headspace** site receives has also been almost doubled. The total number of **headspace** services will expand over time to 90 sites across Australia;
- releasing program guidelines for the innovative Partners in Recovery program, in preparation for the launch of the program in 2013;
- providing increased funding of \$205.9 million over five years, progressively flowing from 1 July 2011, for Access to Allied Psychological Services to target hard to reach groups;
- agreeing with the states and territories a landmark National Partnership Agreement Supporting National Mental Health Reform, providing \$200 million over five years for 17 projects to provide people with mental illness with better accommodation services and better alternatives to hospital admission;
- providing funding of \$7.4 million over five years through the National Health and Medical Research Council to three mental health Centres of Research Excellence, focusing on suicide prevention, substance abuse and better mental health planning;

- tackling suicide through measures including providing free calls from mobiles to Lifeline, under the Taking Action to Tackle Suicide Package, which commenced 1 July 2011; and
- launching the new national e-mental health portal, *mindhealthconnect*, which went live ahead of schedule on 29 June 2012.

I trust that the above information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Paula Zylstra

Director

Private Mental Health Services Section

25 September 2012