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\$191.6m for improved care for patients with severe mental health conditions

Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ageing, Senator Brett Mason today announced \$191.6 million over five years of Federal funding for specialist mental health nurses to assist existing service providers such as GPs to provide care for people with severe mental health disorders.

The announcement follows last week's release of the Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing report (AIHW) *Mental health services in Australia 2004-05*, indicating nearly 11% of GP consultations relate to mental health.

AGPN Chair Dr Tony Hobbs said between January and March this year over 200,000 claims had been made by GPs using the new mental health Medicare item numbers introduced in November last year.

"Obviously mental health is a growing concern for the Australian community. As we slowly remove stigmas surrounding related conditions and people are more comfortable accessing care, more support is needed for general practice – the funding of specialist mental health nurses will help.

"General practice is often the first port of call for people suffering from mental health conditions," Dr Hobbs said.

Specialist mental health nurses make an enormous difference to the patients they care for. They will play a very important role as part of the GP led team-based care arrangement through assisting with care planning and review, medication monitoring and physical health care. They will also help the patient access other health professionals and services and where appropriate liaise and assist the patient's family and carers.

AGPN CEO Kate Carnell said this approach will greatly improve the support mechanisms for the patient.

"All too often patients with severe mental health conditions are falling through the gaps. Even in cases where they have been seen by a GP or have been hospitalised.

"This funding will help to ensure patients in need receive a more co-ordinated approach to the ongoing care required.

"As a result of specialist mental health care nurses working as part of the general practice team we hope to see a reduction in hospitalisations and more importantly better clinical and social outcomes for patients." Ms Carnell said.

The funding under the *Mental Health Nurses Initiative* will allow for divisions of general practice to employ and support specialist nurses in their local areas. The funding has been applauded by the

peak body representing the 119 divisions of general practice, the Australian General Practice Network (AGPN).

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