



NEWS RELEASE

Australian Divisions of General Practice Ltd.

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PM's mental health package: don't overlook mental health in regional and rural Australia

ADGP has welcomed the Australian Government's commitment of \$1.8 billion over 5 years to mental health but caution that the package may fall short for rural, remote and regional Australia.

Dr Jenny Thomson, Chair ADGP said "Mental health problems span geographical boundaries: they exist as much in the country as they do in our cities and larger centres.

"Improving community access to publicly funded psychological services is a very welcome measure. However, the Medicare-based payment aspect of the Government's package is not the only answer when it comes to rural, remote and regional Australia.

"Our network of Divisions repeatedly tell us about the challenges of attracting and retaining allied health and specialist workforces to support GPs in team based approaches to care in the community.

"Rural and regional areas simply do not have the same health infrastructure and workforce supply as metropolitan regions.

"Psychiatrists, for example, mostly practice in capital cities – 86% of them, in fact. The same trend applies to psychologists and mental health nurses.

"This is why we already have targeted programs such as practice incentive payments for rural GP practices to employ practice nurses, MSOAP for psychiatry outreach services, More Allied Health Services (MAHS) for allied health and Better Outcomes for Mental Health"

"Similarly, we can't look to have a one size fits all approach to this mental health package. A Medicare-based approach will go some way to meeting need for psychological services. However, it can't be the only model of care.

"We must have systems and incentives that attract a range of allied mental health providers, including psychologists, to work in teams with GPs the areas they are needed most. A Medicare model alone will not deliver that. But there are existing programs already being delivered by Divisions that can – and these can be rapidly and cost effectively expanded."

The *Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care* program has shown how team work can deliver results. In their first 2 ½ years, access to psychological services run by Divisions have already supported well over 26,000 consumers in the primary health care setting. 88 per cent of these clients - who are typically on low incomes, aged around 40 and been diagnosed with depression or anxiety - have got better.

"Unlike many mental health services which concentrate in major urban centres, the level of uptake of these Division-based services in rural areas has been proportionally higher than in urban areas alone," Dr Thomson said

"While not a mental health initiative, a great proportion of MAHS funding has been used to employ psychologists – a measure of demand in country areas for these services.

"Most importantly our members tell us that *Better Outcomes* and MAHS has given them the means to offer secure employment tenure to psychologists and other allied mental health workers - a factor that is far more likely to attract them into regional and rural areas than the promise of a Medicare rebate alone."

Currently, the Divisions network employs almost 300 full time equivalent psychologists through Better Outcomes, and 40 full time equivalent psychologists under MAHS.

"This highlights just how important Division-run primary mental health services are to communities that would otherwise be facing an even more serious mental health service gap and just how vital the Divisions are to ensuring services reaching the whole community," Dr Thomson said

"These approaches are better buys that are pragmatic workable and affordable.

“We would urge the Government to expand and extending these models as they implement the new mental health package.

“Divisions can broker these outcomes Australia-wide. They are a network of 'can do' organisations in which governments can have confidence and the only infrastructure with reach into Australia's most rural and remote areas to provide locally targeted and effective health solutions to national problems” said Dr Thomson.

For more information please call Jenny Thomson, ADGP Chair, on 02 6228 0800.

WHAT IS ADGP?

- ADGP is the peak body representing 119 Divisions of General Practice and eight State-based organisations (SBOs) around Australia. The Divisions Network supports general practice and their practice teams and drives the implementation of innovative health strategies.
- ADGP, through the Divisions Network, works to integrate general practice with other sectors of the health system, both government and non-government, to deliver high quality care to the Australian community.
 - ADGP is committed to promoting the health of all Australians by supporting the role of Divisions in the nation's primary health care system.

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