

# GP mental health program

## Key Issues

Patients now see their GP for mental health more than any other health issue, and this trend is increasing. Despite this, minimal funding has been directed to general practice to allow GPs to provide mental health services.

## Patient consideration

Patients presenting in general practice with mental health concerns often have complex and multiple physical and mental health issues.

Funding needs to be reformed to provide increased rebates for longer consultations, and to allow for GPs and psychiatrists to coordinate care to ensure patients are able to continue treatment that keeps them out of hospital and living in the community.

## Government consideration

According to Medicare data, 2.4 million Australians (9.8% of Australians) received Medicare-subsidised mental health-specific services in 2016–17. This is an increase from 5.7% in 2008–09.

Most OECD countries spend between 12% and 16% of their health budget on mental health services, while Australia spends less than 8%.

Improved access to mental health care in the primary care setting can be achieved by funding coordinated mental health management through general practices.

The AMA wants the balance between funding acute care in public hospitals, primary care, and community-managed mental health to be correctly weighted. Funding mental health care and services should be on the basis of need and demand, not a competition between sectors and specific conditions.

Funding should also be provided to allow general practices to employ dedicated mental health staff, such as mental health nurses or case coordinators, to ensure that more mental health care is provided in the primary care setting.

Currently GPs are able to provide support to patients with mental health issues through the Better Access Program, however this involves referring the patient to service outside of the practice. Many GPs report that their patients are unable to find appointments in suitable times. The AMA is calling for a program which would support the management of mental health issues by the patient's GP with reliable support from appropriately trained health professionals in the practice or in collaboration with the practice.

More access to mental health assessment facilities for public patients is also required. This should include more and better resourced mobile outreach teams operating extended hours for high risk patients.

## AMA position

The AMA calls on the major parties to commit to fund a dedicated general practice based mental health program that allows GPs to provide coordinated care and case management and deliver improved health outcomes in patients.

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