



NSW Consumer Advisory Group – Mental Health Inc.
ABN 82 549 537 349

19th August 2010

The Hon. Nicola Roxon MP
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister Roxon,

Better Access & ATAPS Programs

The NSW Consumer Advisory Group – Mental Health Inc. (NSW CAG) is the peak, independent, state-wide organisation representing the views of mental health consumers (people who use mental health services) at a policy level, working to achieve and support systemic change. Our vision is for all mental health consumers to experience fair access to quality services that reflect their needs.

NSW CAG welcomes the current review of the Medicare Better Access and ATAPS Programs to ensure that they are providing effective and accessible services to people who experience a mental health problem. However we are greatly concerned about the proposed removal of Social Workers and Occupational Therapists from the Medicare Better Access Program as we believe that such a decision will be to the detriment of mental health consumers. NSW CAG is also disappointed that no consultation with consumers occurred to illicit their experiences and thoughts about the Better Access Program prior to this decision being made.

We write this letter to you to urge you to continue the provision of services by Social Workers and Occupational Therapists through the Better Access Program and highlight areas we believe need to be considered in the current review, including:

- Consumer participation
- Ensuring a recovery oriented approach to all treatment and care
- Access to services
- Continuity of care
- Choice in treatment and care
- Professional training and accreditation

The Liberal Government has acknowledged the importance of this matter and has made a commitment to reinstate Occupational Therapists and Social Workers to the Better Access Program if elected. We ask you to also make such a commitment.

The Proposed Removal of Social Workers and Occupational Therapists from the Better Access Scheme

Choice, access and continuity of care are three key features that consumers identify as essential parts of mental health programs, and any reviews need to use these as determinants of a successful mental health program.

The Better Access Program increases community access to mental health professionals, through Medicare rebates and provides a range of choices in the type of practitioner a person can access. This is very much in line with the philosophy of recovery (see below) where treatment and care is tailored to an individual's personal circumstances, preferences and needs. Through the Better Access Program people are able to have access to a range of professionals including Psychiatrists, Psychologists, Occupational Therapists, Social Workers, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with mental health qualifications. This model also allows people to access support in a geographical location that suits them.

It is the indication of the Government that such services will still be offered by Social Workers and Occupational Therapists under the ATAPS program. However, Better Access and ATAPS are two different services, and therefore, meet the needs of two different groups of people. ATAPS addresses chronic mental health issues. Better Access on the other hand, provides services to people experiencing wide spread mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety, and early intervention, so that people can address their concerns and their mental health before it progresses to a chronic stage or causes significant life disruption.

It is necessary that all people who experience any form of mental illness have the opportunity to access the service provider who best meets their individual needs.

Social Workers and Occupational Therapists are key professional groups that bring a range of skills to their work, including the assessment of psychosocial functioning and holistically working with individuals, families and groups. They provide assistance with living and practical skills, and are able to spend time in the community with the consumer practicing these skills. Psychologists who also provide different and beneficial models of treatment do not typically provide this practical assistance and approach.

By removing Social Workers and Occupational Therapists from the Better Access Program, the Government is essentially withdrawing choice and treatment options for people who are experiencing a mental health problem. This lack of choice is a clear step away from a recovery focused model.

Not only does this action reduce choice, but it reduces access. This is of particular concern for mental health consumers in regional, remote and rural areas who have even fewer choices, and where regular access to Social Workers and Occupational Therapists is often easier than access to psychological services. Indeed, in some remote areas, Social Workers or Occupational Therapists are the only practitioners available. If the Government's plans to remove Social Workers and Occupational Therapists from Better Access proceeds, this will only increase the disparity of services between those in rural and remote areas, and those in metropolitan regions of Australia.

NSW CAG urges the Australian Government to continue to provide access to multiple disciplinary options by retaining social workers and occupational therapists in the Better Access Program.

Review of the ATAPS and Better Access Programs

Ensuring a Recovery Oriented Approach to Treatment and Care

NSW CAG would like to draw attention to the philosophy of recovery which we believe needs to underpin all services relevant to mental health. The philosophy emphasises that recovering from illness is a very personal journey that is different for each person. It is a holistic approach to illness, noting that social, economic, education, employment, housing and other needs are as important as addressing psychological and physical needs. The focus is on the individual and their needs first, and on the illness, which is only one part of a person, second. Recovery, in this context, is not merely about being symptom-free or off medications. It is about seeking satisfaction with daily life.

Recovery is a deeply personal, unique process of changing one's attitudes, values, feelings, goals, skills, and or roles. It is a way of living a satisfying, hopeful, and contributing life. Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in ones' life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of psychiatric disability (Anthony, 1993).

Basing Better Access and ATAPS in the recovery principles means that issues such as early intervention, affordable, community based services, choices of practitioner and location, and consumer directed services become core features of the programs. Such approaches maximize the opportunity for consumers to experience recovery, and result in a stronger health focus that meets the needs of people who experience a mental illness.

To enable this access to a range of professionals including Psychologists, Psychiatrists, Occupational Therapists and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander's with mental health qualifications in both programs is essential.

Recommendation:

- ***That the philosophy of recovery underpins the ATAPS and Better Access scheme and guides all decisions made about the programs.***

Consumer Participation

Genuine consumer participation is an essential component of a recovery approach, and participation is enshrined as a standalone concept in key policies such as *The National Mental Health Policy 2008*. It is therefore, essential, that consumer voices be a central part of informing major service provision evaluations and changes such as this.

Recommendation:

- ***That consumer representatives be appointed to sit on any review panel or committee relevant to this review***
- ***That consumers perceptions and experiences of the Better Access and ATAPs schemes be collected as a key component for informing any changes or improvements made to the schemes***

General Comments

Currently professionals who are eligible to work under the Better Access Program have to undertake Accreditation and ongoing mental health training. NSW CAG sees this as essential to ensuring a high level of accountability and accreditation process for practitioners operating under the program. NSW CAG would like to see this requirement also transferred to the ATAPS program where professionals are working with people who have more chronic mental health needs.

NSW CAG would also like to highlight that through Medicare, consumers are able to access mental health support up to twelve (12) times a year as, and when, required. Conversely, NSW CAG has heard a number of reports where Divisions of General Practice run short of allocated funds through ATAPS, and as a consequence, consumers are unable to commence, or receive, further treatment until the funding is renewed. This is of great concern to NSW CAG where people are not able to access support, or experience disruption to their treatment and care.

As part of the Government's reviews of ATAPS and Better Access, this situation needs to be addressed. It is necessary that everyone is able to receive timely and consistent mental health support when they require it.

NSW CAG recommends that when reviewing both programs, the government ensures that they provide:

- ***A recovery oriented focus***
- ***Continuity of care***
- ***Ease of access***
- ***Choice and flexibility in treatment and care***
- ***Appropriate training and accreditation of professionals***
- ***Access to a range of professionals including Social Workers and Occupational Therapists***

NSW CAG urges the Australian Government to consider the above recommendations when reviewing the Better Access and ATAPS Programs.

Yours sincerely,



Karen Oakley
Executive Officer

Anthony, W. A. (1993). Recovery from mental illness: The guiding vision of the mental health service system in the 1990s. *Psychosocial Rehabilitation Journal*, 16(4), 11-23.