

I am an individual living with significant mental illness that at times impacts my ability to work and leads me to suicidal periods (several past attempts). I have been very well-managed over the past decade by a medical team in the South Eastern suburbs, and have therefore been relatively well. I am a very compliant patient, but do require regular care from a medical team to keep me well.

In mid 2018 I moved to the western suburbs of Melbourne. It was a daunting task to establish a new medical team on the west, but I was highly motivated. I began seeking a GP immediately, although all of my local clinics were large bulk-billing practices, and had almost no female GPs other than registrars (I need a female GP due to severe PTSD from sexual abuse). I saw several registrars over the next year, but had great problems getting care for my mental health from them – because they never knew me long enough to develop a relationship with me (each one only being at the clinic for 6 months at a time), they were not prepared to do things like make care plans, adjust my medication in response to my needs, or write me referrals. I had almost a decade worth of medical records from my previous clinic, but none of the registrars were prepared to look at that much paperwork. In several discussions with the practice manager at my local clinic, I finally managed to get in to see the one permanent female GP. When I explained my situation and she looked at my (short) file at this practice, she explained to me that she would not take on my case because she doesn't have time for complex patients – she prefers to treat colds etc because she is too busy. She said I should keep seeing registrars if I insisted on having a female GP.

At this time I was starting to enter a low period in my mental health – a natural part of having bipolar – and felt particularly at risk knowing that I didn't have a regular GP who knew my situation and would support me. Because I was in a low period yet couldn't get help, I attempted to adjust my medication myself (as doctors had done for me in the past), but attempting to fill my scripts more regularly at the pharmacy to increase my dose led to questions – they said I was not allowed to fill my scripts that fast, and wouldn't release my medication. I had no way to up-titrate without a doctor providing me with a letter, which no one would do for me.

Desperate, I asked my partner to ask around at work for any recommendations, and finally got in to see a GP half an hour from home. She listened to me, and helped me to adjust my medication, but also said that she didn't feel prepared to handle a 'complex' case such as mine. She did however refer me to another GP who might be able to help.

I made an appointment with this next GP, and she actually really listened. I couldn't believe over a year after moving to the west, I finally had a GP who seemed to care. She said she was happy to take me on, but wanted me to have the immediate support of a psychologist and psychiatrist. She gave me some names to make appointments.

First I attempted the psychiatrist, particularly as I had been feeling suicidal for some weeks. The staff at the clinic told me that the psychiatrist I had been referred to was on leave for several months. I said it was urgent, and they agreed to pass my referral along to other psychiatrists in the practice to see if I could get in to see someone. I chased them up for several weeks, and was finally told that

none of the other doctors were prepared to take on my case because it was 'not their speciality'. I was advised to make an appointment for the original psychiatrist for when she finally returned. It has been several months and I still haven't had my appointment.

In the mean time, I also attempted to make an appointment with a psychologist. I called 5 different psychologists, but none of them worked any hours outside of business hours. I work full time, and I can't afford to take a day off work to see my psychologist, especially when sometimes I have to see them as often as once or twice a week.

I have been living in the West for well over a year now, and while I finally have a GP who is willing to take on my care, I still don't have a psychiatrist or psychologist. I have had to battle through an intense period of several months of feeling suicidal without any medical support, despite the fact that I have been highly motivated to seek support, and am also fortunate enough to have the financial means to pay for any services I might need.

Having a mental illness is a constant battle, but I know from my past experiences that with a good medical team it is possible to live a mostly normal and productive life. My concern is that if someone like me – highly motivated, financially able, very compliant – cannot get appropriate medical care for their mental health purely because of where they live – what hope does someone less fortunate have? Someone who doesn't have enough energy to chase up services, or who relies on medicare rebates? How many people are not getting medical care because it is honestly so hard to get what we need?

I have fought so hard for so long to find a way to live with my mental illness. These past few months I have been terrified that a failing system could lead to a tragic end to my story. It shouldn't be this hard to get help.