

Submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Mental Health

From Judith O'Farrell, Mental Health Social Worker in private practice in Echuca.
(Medicare Provider # 2826072J)

Difficulties encountered in my practice and in the practice of my colleague [REDACTED] [REDACTED]:

1. Pressure provided to myself to cover demand from referring G.P's for clients with serious mental health problems who can, and usually only will, attend when I bulk bill the cost of counselling sessions. These clients are generally on some sort of Centrelink payment and have no ability to cover any gap in fees. I regularly have to turn potential clients away or not be able to offer help till too far into the future to meet their immediate needs. There is a crucial short supply of services available in Echuca, and surrounds, for people living in low -income circumstances. There are only two social workers, and as far as I know no psychologists, in Echuca who are prepared to bulk bill clients.
2. Bulk billing can lead some clients to the assumption that attending sessions that they have scheduled is flexible! This means that clients schedule sessions and frequently don't attend. There needs to be some mechanisation in place to discourage this abuse of the system. Also Medicare is not prepared to cover the cost of these sessions, so I sit and wait in vain and am unable to recoup the loss in income. Medicare needs to recognise this shortcoming in their system.
3. The scheduled bulk billing fee provided by Medicare is inadequate. It's \$74.80 for a one hour session. (The Australian Association of Social Workers recommends a per hour fee of \$220.00.) This means that I am unable to afford a receptionist, cleaning or bookkeeping assistance. Providing these services means quite an added burden to my workload. Also even with my private clients, who are a small fraction of my clientele, local people are unable to afford \$220.00, so I charge \$100.00 per session. It needs to be noted that each session requires considerable preparation and writing up of case notes after the session so it's not just the hour spent with the client that is a time consideration.
4. I regularly attend critical incidents booked by one of the 3 agencies that I work for. They delay payment for these services for weeks and even months and

don't cover the cost of the mileage. This can be significant in country areas. They do, however, pay for time spent in travel.

Positives that flow from the work that I do with clients:

1. Having presented the difficulties I now feel the need to balance it with the reasons I continue to do this job and feel privileged to still be able to do it at my age (77). It allows me to gain a knowledge of the intimate details of many people's lives and be trusted with this knowledge and the belief that as an independent influence I may be able to assist them to resolve a crisis.
2. I am repeatedly confirmed in the belief that most physical illnesses (maybe 90% of them) that people suffer have a psychological basis. This affirms that by my assisting the promotion of good mental health a person's total wellbeing is improved. To me this justifies any effort or resources that a government can supply in the prevention or alleviation of mental ill health.
3. As a micro operator we, Mental Health Social Workers, work behind the scenes to lessen the stresses that modern society heaps on, especially women, in balancing the demands of their everyday lives (family and work) and the intergenerational expectations of a woman's conforming and submissive role in relationships.
4. There are two government funded Mental Health organisations already operating in Echuca – one under the auspices of [REDACTED] and the other through [REDACTED]. The former is unable to offer regular counselling as it is insufficiently resourced to do little more than assessment of clients seriously affected by their mental health condition. The latter has recently been enlarged with the addition of more mental health workers. I approached each organisation encouraging them to make a submission to the Royal Commission. As I am on an extended holiday till the end of June I am uncertain as to what their response will be. Each would have a valuable contribution to make to your information gathering.

Judith O'Farrell