

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

Thursday 13 February 2014

### **Health policy experts hail “remarkable” increase in mental disorder treatment rates**

The Federal Government’s Better Access mental health initiative, which enables access to Medicare-rebated psychological treatment, has resulted in a “remarkable” increase in treatment rates for mental disorders in Australia according to a new study by health policy experts. The study by Professor Harvey Whiteford and colleagues found a significant increase in the population treatment rate for mental disorders in Australia from 37% in 2006–07 to 46% in 2009–10, and directly attributes this increase to the introduction of the Better Access initiative in November 2006. The study’s authors conclude that the increase in the treatment rate is “remarkable by international standards. No other country of which we are aware has demonstrated such an increase within three years.”

Commonly occurring mental disorders such as anxiety, depression and substance use are leading causes of disability in Australia, with major economic costs and personal suffering associated with untreated mental disorders. Previously only one third of people with these disorders accessed treatment. The study authors expect treatment rates to continue to rise with ongoing Medicare-funded access to psychological treatment.

The Executive Director of the Australian Psychological Society, Professor Lyn Littlefield OAM, has welcomed the new study and believes that, as well as improving access to psychological treatment, the availability of rebated psychological services through Australia’s Medicare system has contributed to a significant destigmatisation of help-seeking for mental health problems. “The availability of Medicare rebates for psychological treatment in private settings via GP referral has clearly resulted in many individuals using these services where previously they would not have done so. The inclusion of mental health psychology services under the nation’s funded health system has begun to promote interventions for mental health to a similar standing to physical health services funded under Medicare, which is an extremely important development”, said Professor Littlefield.

Professor Littlefield believes these significant and hard-won achievements as the result of Government mental health policy need to be protected and built on. Although there have been impressive increases in treatment rates since the introduction of Better Access, the figures from the recent study show that 54% of people with mental disorders are still not accessing treatment.

“We have already begun to see an erosion of the effectiveness of Better Access since funding cuts came into effect last year”, said Professor Littlefield. “We need to protect the remarkable gains that have been made in treatment rates for mental illness since the Better Access initiative was introduced, and ensure the appropriate level of funding to provide these direct psychological services to people in need.”

**- Ends -**

**Notes to editors:**

The new study referred to in this release is:

Whiteford, H. A., Buckingham, W. J., Harris, M. G., Burgess, P. M., Pirkis, J. E., Barendregt, J. J., & Hall, W. D. (2014). Estimating treatment rates for mental disorders in Australia. *Australian Health Review*, 38, 80–85. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1071/AH13142>

For background information on the Better Access initiative, download the APS report:

*Seven years of Better Access: Consumers show benefits from an effective, affordable and destigmatising mental health reform*

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