

# Key issues for the 2013 Federal election

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APS

Australian  
Psychological  
Society

The Australian Psychological Society is the premier professional organisation for psychology with over 21,000 members. Psychologists represent the largest mental health and psychological workforce in Australia. As their representative body, the Australian Psychological Society has access to a vast pool of psychological expertise from both academic and professional service delivery perspectives. The Australian Psychological Society is represented on a number of Federal Government advisory groups involved in the planning, implementation and ongoing monitoring of Government policy initiatives.

Through their work with many Australians, from young infants to the elderly, communities and organisations, psychologists and the Australian Psychological Society are acutely aware of the need to continue to invest in reforms to improve health care and community wellbeing.

In this election, the Australian Psychological Society has identified 10 areas where there are real opportunities to bring significant benefits to the Australian community by increasing access to effective psychological care and knowledge. The Australian Psychological Society believes these initiatives have the potential to influence the voting of various segments of the electorate.

# Election opportunities to improve the health and wellbeing of Australians

- 1 Improve access to evidence-based psychological interventions for people with severe high prevalence mental health disorders
- 2 Improve access to evidence-based interventions for the management of chronic disease
- 3 Improve access to psychological services in rural and remote communities
- 4 Ensure the supply of a well trained psychology workforce by improved funding of professional psychology training programs
- 5 Improve early diagnosis and intervention services for people with dementia
- 6 Improve the quality of care delivered to residents in Residential Aged Care Facilities by facilitating access to psychological services
- 7 Ensure adequate pathways to care and coordination of services for young children with mental health problems and their families
- 8 Improve assessment and intervention services for school-aged children with developmental learning needs
- 9 Develop an effective national psychosocial response to disasters
- 10 Build the capacity of organisations to become psychologically healthy workplaces

# 1

## Improve access to evidence-based psychological interventions for people with severe high prevalence mental health disorders

### *Reinstate the Better Access 'exceptional circumstances' sessions*

Funding cuts to the highly successful Better Access initiative have had a marked impact on the thousands of Australians who can no longer access the appropriate length of effective and cost-efficient psychological treatment. There is evidence that the sessions of psychological treatment under 'exceptional circumstances' that were cut from 1 January 2013 are effective and necessary for a large number of Better Access consumers. The cuts have primarily affected people requiring additional treatment under 'exceptional circumstances' for severe depression or anxiety disorders with significant additional complexities.

The Australian Psychological Society seeks support from all political parties for the permanent reinstatement of the six Better Access 'exceptional circumstances' sessions removed by the current Government. Reinstatement of the sessions would enable many thousands of Australians with serious but common mental health disorders to access the appropriate length of effective psychological treatment. These many thousands of Australians are currently denied access to effective psychological treatment, with a concomitant impact on family stress, productivity and hospital admissions.

The reinstatement of the 'exceptional circumstances' sessions under tightened access criteria could be achieved by a modest increase in funding of \$16M per year.

*For further details of this proposal and funding costs, please contact the Australian Psychological Society.*

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# 2

## Improve access to evidence-based interventions for the management of chronic disease

### *Support access to psychological interventions for behaviour change*

The Australian community requires interventions to lower the incidence of obesity and reduce the burden of chronic illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, respiratory disease and cancer. These health concerns are listed in the top eight National Health Priority Areas. Current public health, medical and nursing programs impact on these health priorities, but do not address the human behaviour factors that underpin these lifestyle-related health problems.

Many Australians find lifestyle change difficult and would benefit from the support of psychologists, who are health behaviour change experts. Self-determined health behaviour choices could be significantly enhanced through access to cognitive behavioural interventions delivered by the health psychology workforce. The Australian Psychological Society calls on all political parties to increase access to evidence-based psychological interventions to address the burden of chronic illness on individuals, families, communities and the broader health system. To this end, the Australian Psychological Society proposes a 12-month project to trial health psychology behaviour change services in 10 Medicare Locals.

At a cost of \$4.7M, the project would provide 10 sessions of psychological intervention for behaviour change per consumer and would include the administration and evaluation of the project.

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# 3

## Improve access to psychological services in rural and remote communities

### *Address the decline in access to rural psychology internships and extend Telehealth initiatives*

Mental health problems among people living in rural and remote areas of Australia are at serious levels and there are substantial shortages of psychologists in these regions to address the problems. This shortage has been exacerbated by recent changes to the standards for psychology internship pathways to registration that are resulting in significantly less availability of internships in rural and remote workplaces.

The Australian Psychological Society seeks the support of all political parties for a staged initiative to develop a sustainable 'grow-your-own' pipeline for the rural and remote psychology workforce. This entails the Australian Psychological Society establishing partnerships with universities offering professional training involving a one-year internship and key rural service provider agencies to facilitate access to rural internships, supervisors and centralised coordination. The project would also include rural practice incentive packages for psychologists similar to those provided for the rural medical and pharmacy workforce.

The Australian Psychological Society is committed to ensuring equity of access to psychological services for people living in rural and remote Australia. In regions where access to psychological services is limited, the Society also seeks a commitment from all political parties to extend Telehealth funded initiatives to psychological services.

The cost of the 'grow-your-own' workforce pipeline project is estimated to be \$443,000.

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# 4

## Ensure the supply of a well trained psychology workforce by improved funding of professional psychology training programs

### *Address the decline in postgraduate professional psychology training programs*

In the context of high demand for a well trained health workforce, the psychology profession is considered by Government to be in shortage and the discipline is facing a serious situation with regard to the funding of postgraduate professional education and training. Professional psychology coursework Masters and Doctoral degrees have been in decline since 2004 when the Federal Government changed the cluster funding arrangements. The change resulted in a funding reduction to psychology professional programs of some 59 per cent, with the Government only partially redressing the cut in 2008. There has been a net decrease in postgraduate professional psychology degrees across Australia despite the very large and growing unmet demand for places.

The Australian Psychological Society is seeking the support of all political parties to elevate professional psychology tertiary training from Cluster 5 to Cluster 8 to enable appropriate funding of the higher costs associated with professional training as a psychologist. This would raise entry level psychology training funding to be equivalent to other health professions such as medicine and dentistry.

The cost of appropriately funding the training of psychologists is estimated to be \$2.2M per year.

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# 5

## Improve early diagnosis and intervention services for people with dementia

### *Fund access to neuropsychological services for early dementia*

The prevalence of dementia in Australia is expected to at least triple by 2050 and there will be a very significant shortfall in the availability of residential aged care places. Early diagnosis and intervention has been demonstrated to reduce the need for residential care placement and to keep people with dementia living in the community longer. The primary care sector would be better equipped to undertake early diagnosis if they had access to the diagnostic contributions of clinical neuropsychologists. This would facilitate the application of sensitive measures of cognitive functioning to the investigative process; these diagnostic tools are particularly accurate very early in the disease process and can therefore provide a solid foundation for prognosis and informed treatment planning.

The Australian Psychological Society is calling on political parties to commit to providing medical practitioners with the ability to refer people with suspected symptoms or significant risk factors for dementia to receive Government-funded clinical neuropsychological assessment and treatment planning. This time limited trial is presented with a view to offering a cost-effective long-term solution to this growing problem.

The cost is estimated to be \$4.6M for a one-year trial in two States, with savings from reduced inappropriate medication predicted to render the program cost-neutral.

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# 6

## Improve the quality of care delivered to residents in Residential Aged Care Facilities by facilitating access to psychological services

### *Provide access to psychological assessment and treatment for people residing in aged care facilities*

The incidence of psychological disorders is much higher among people living in Residential Aged Care Facilities than in the wider community. Mental illness and disruptive behaviour among people in residential aged care facilities are frequently treated with psychoactive medication which has undesirable side effects and is expensive to provide and monitor. Psychological assessment and interventions for members of the aged community have been shown to be effective in managing mood disorders and disruptive behaviour, and to improve quality of life for residents as well as reducing costs for the facility by decreasing the need for pharmacological interventions.

The Australian Psychological Society seeks a commitment from all political parties to increase access to evidence-based psychological interventions for people living in residential aged care facilities. To this end, the Australian Psychological Society proposes a 12-month trial of supervised placements in residential aged care facilities for professional postgraduate students. Under supervision, students could provide psychological assessments, mood and behaviour management interventions for residents as well as training for facility staff on behaviour management.

The project would cost \$380,000, funding supervision arrangements, administrative costs and an evaluation of the program.

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# 7

## Ensure adequate pathways to care and coordination of services for young children with mental health problems and their families

### *Coordinate services to ensure children with mental health problems are appropriately assessed and treated*

It is well recognised that good mental health in childhood provides a foundation for positive mental health and wellbeing. However, many children with mental health difficulties and their families fall between the gaps in service delivery and do not get the coordinated care that they require. The 3-year-old Health Check is a commendable Government initiative and will provide a more systematic 'early warning system' to increase the detection of children experiencing difficulties at age three. The essential next step is further comprehensive assessment and treatment by appropriately skilled professionals.

The Australian Psychological Society seeks a commitment from all political parties to a program of funding for the provision of 'Healthy Kids Coordinators' for each sentinel Medicare Local that is involved in the Government trial of the three-year-old Health Check. Coordinators would be clinicians such as psychologists and paediatricians with expertise in children's mental health and development, and a thorough understanding of the local service system. These coordinators would facilitate assessments of children experiencing mental health difficulties, determine appropriate interventions for the child and/or family and ascertain who is best to deliver the intervention, and liaise and review progress with the service provider.

The proposed four-year program would require \$18.6M in funding to substantially address the current gaps in pathways to care for children with mental health problems and their families.

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## Improve assessment and intervention services for school-aged children with developmental learning needs

### *Provide access to psychological and other services to improve educational outcomes for children with developmental learning disabilities*

While recent national Government initiatives for children with disabilities have been of enormous assistance for those with specific disabilities, there remains a continuing gap in services for children with developmental learning needs. This group of children have needs that are often neither identified nor satisfactorily met, and their school experience and later life options are significantly reduced as a result of their lowered academic performance.

The Australian Psychological Society seeks the support of all political parties for a program that would provide schools with a targeted bundle of funded assessment and intervention services to assess, identify needs and devise a program of interventions for children with developmental learning needs. The bundled services could include psychology, neuropsychology, speech pathology, occupational therapy, and special education consultants. This multidisciplinary program would improve educational outcomes for children with developmental learning disabilities and be of immense value to their families, the school and the broader community.

The proposal involves a staged introduction in 50 State schools commencing with a cost of \$500,000 and expanding to 500 schools over five years.

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# 9

## Develop an effective national psychosocial response to disasters

### *Capitalise on existing expertise to provide a national psychosocial response to disasters*

Natural disasters in Australia affect millions of people and current predictions forecast more frequent and severe disasters from extreme weather events in the coming decades. Mental health following disasters is a key economic and public health issue.

The Australian Psychological Society seeks the support of all political parties to capitalise on existing expertise in the Australian Psychological Society Disaster Response Network to develop a national psychosocial response to disasters. The Network is a national system of psychologists who have a special interest and expertise in working with individuals and communities affected by disasters and emergencies in Australia. There are currently about 1700 members in the Network. The proposal includes training of psychologists around Australia in preparation for disasters, including the provision of an online training program to skill up psychologists immediately following a disaster if an event happens unexpectedly in an unprepared area. The proposal also includes the establishment of an expert cross-professional psychosocial recovery reference group to enable a coordinated psychosocial response, and a social media platform to communicate with the affected public around psychological and mental health needs following a disaster.

The proposal to develop a national psychosocial response to disasters is estimated to cost \$600,000 over four years.

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# 10

## Build the capacity of organisations to become psychologically healthy workplaces

### *Support the Australian Psychological Society Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program*

A psychologically healthy workplace promotes employee health and wellbeing, enhancing organisational performance and productivity. The benefits of a psychologically healthy workplace range from increased employee morale and productivity and reduced distress, to organisational cost variables such as a lower staff absenteeism.

The Australian Psychological Society has developed an evidence-based initiative, the Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program, to enhance workplace practices and policies to support employee health and wellbeing across Australian businesses. Workplaces can be assessed on a range of common workplace factors and publically recognised as a psychologically healthy workplace. The assessment also identifies areas in need of development, and offers organisations resources to aid this process. The Program has attracted the attention of the Healthy Workforce Strategy Planning Group, which sits under the National Mental Health Commission. In addition, the Australian Psychological Society is a founding member of the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance that brings together like-minded organisations committed to working with businesses to create mentally healthy workplaces.

The Australian Psychological Society seeks the support of all political parties for the Australian Psychological Society Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program to assist in its promotion and dissemination.

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