

# ‘Better Access’ to Medicare Mental Health Items and Psychology Providers

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The issue of ease of access by the community to the new mental health items is central to its success. This paper attempts to examine aspects crucial to access: location of services and costs to clients. In response to questions regarding the new COAG Mental Health initiative and its uptake by the community, the Australian Psychological Society (APS) sought the input of its members who are delivering the new Medicare Benefit Schedule items. The APS received responses from 623 Clinical Psychologists to a range of questions. Additionally, two separate groups of Registered Psychologists (not Clinical Psychologists) were surveyed through email-based questions and an on-line survey, respectively, gaining 812 responses. These responses from the samples of Clinical Psychologists and Registered Psychologists are presented and explained below.

Table 1, below, presents data on demographics of psychology providers for locations across Australia.

**Table 1: Geographical distribution of psychology providers**

	Clinical Psychologist		Registered Psychologist		Totals	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Metropolitan</b>	475	76	591	73	1066	74
<b>Regional</b>	120	19	144	18	264	19
<b>Rural</b>	28	5	77	9	105	7
<b>Total</b>	623		812		1435	

The results show that a quarter of Clinical Psychologists (24%) and Registered Psychologists (27%) offer psychological services outside metropolitan areas. The majority of psychologists (74%) provide services within metropolitan areas, followed by regional (19%) and rural (7%).

Table 2 displays bulk billing patterns of Clinical and Registered Psychologists for locations across Australia: metropolitan, regional, and rural areas.

**Table 2: Bulk billing pattern for psychology providers across metropolitan, regional, and rural areas**

	Clinical Psychologist		Registered Psychologist	
	<i>n</i> Bulk bill	%	<i>n</i> Bulk bill	%
<b>Metropolitan</b>	281	59	259	44
<b>Regional</b>	81	69	85	60
<b>Rural</b>	20	71	43	56
<b>Totals</b>	382	62%	387	48%

62% of Clinical Psychologists report bulk billing clients with the highest proportion (71%) of bulk billing services provided in rural areas. In contrast, 48% of Registered Psychologists bulk bill. The highest proportion of bulk billing services provided by Registered Psychologists (60%) is for regional areas.

Table 3, shows average and average highest Medicare fees charged by psychology providers for locations across Australia.

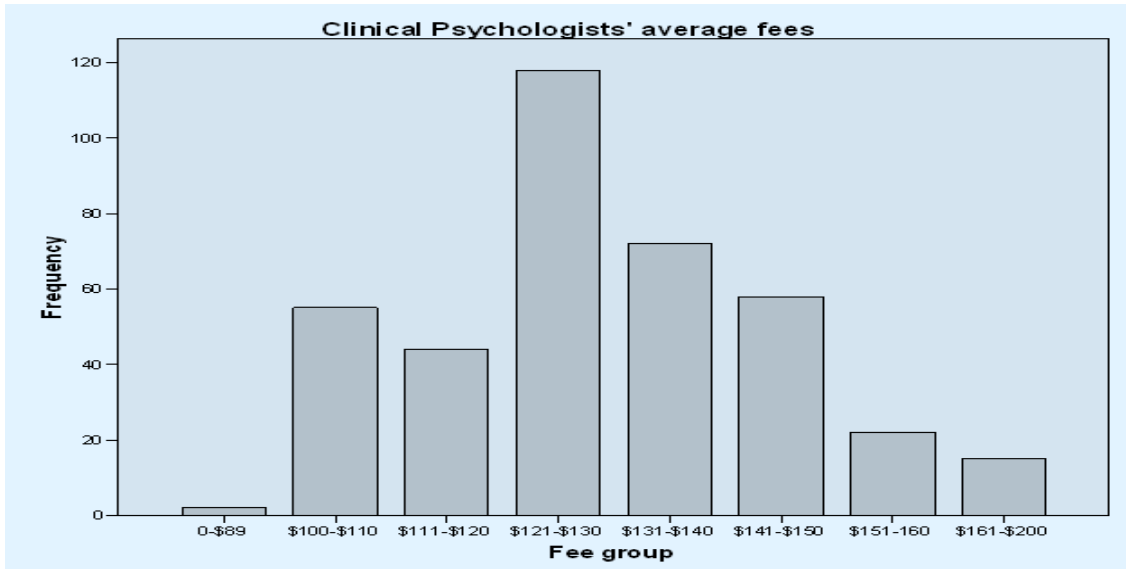
**Table 3: Psychology providers' fees charged across metropolitan, regional, and rural areas**

	Clinical Psychologist		Registered Psychologist	
	Average Medicare fee	Highest average Medicare fee	Average Medicare fee	Highest average Medicare fee
<b>Metropolitan</b>			\$101	\$114
<b>Regional</b>	\$133	\$143	\$99	\$108
<b>Rural</b>	(over all areas)		\$103	\$117
<b>Totals</b>			\$101 (n = 752)	\$113 (n = 755)

Clinical Psychologists' charge an average Medicare fee of \$133 — \$4 above the Schedule Fee. The highest fee charged by Clinical Psychologists, on average, is \$143 — an additional \$13.60 on top of the recommended Schedule Fee of \$129.40. The Registered Psychologists report an average Medicare fee (\$101) and an average highest Medicare fee (\$113) that was, typically, only \$13 to \$25 more than the Schedule Fee of \$88.20, respectively.

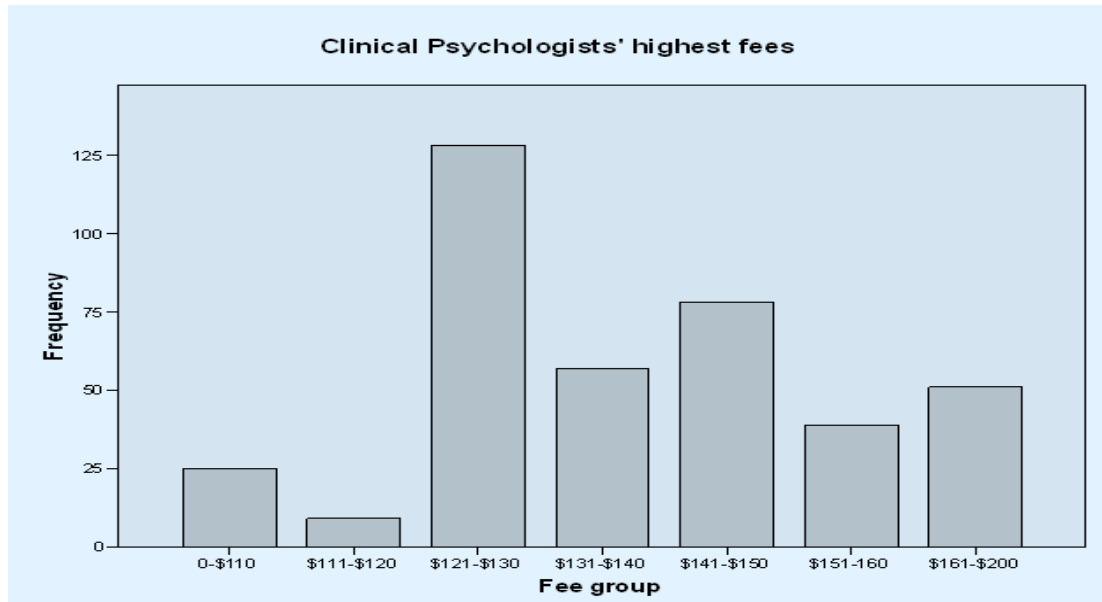
Further, Registered Psychologists' fees were examined according to metropolitan, regional and rural classification. On average, psychologists charge \$101 for services in metropolitan areas, \$99 in regional, and \$103 in rural areas. Average highest fees charged to Medicare clients were found to be \$114 for metropolitan areas, \$108 for regional areas, and \$118 for services provided in rural and remote areas. The highest fees charged, therefore, are on average only \$26 to \$30 more than the Medicare Schedule Fee of \$88.20 for Registered Psychologists.

Alternative representations of the data on fee structures for Clinical and Registered Psychologists are represented in Figures 1 to 4.



**Figure 1: Analysis of Clinical Psychologists' average Medicare fees charged.**

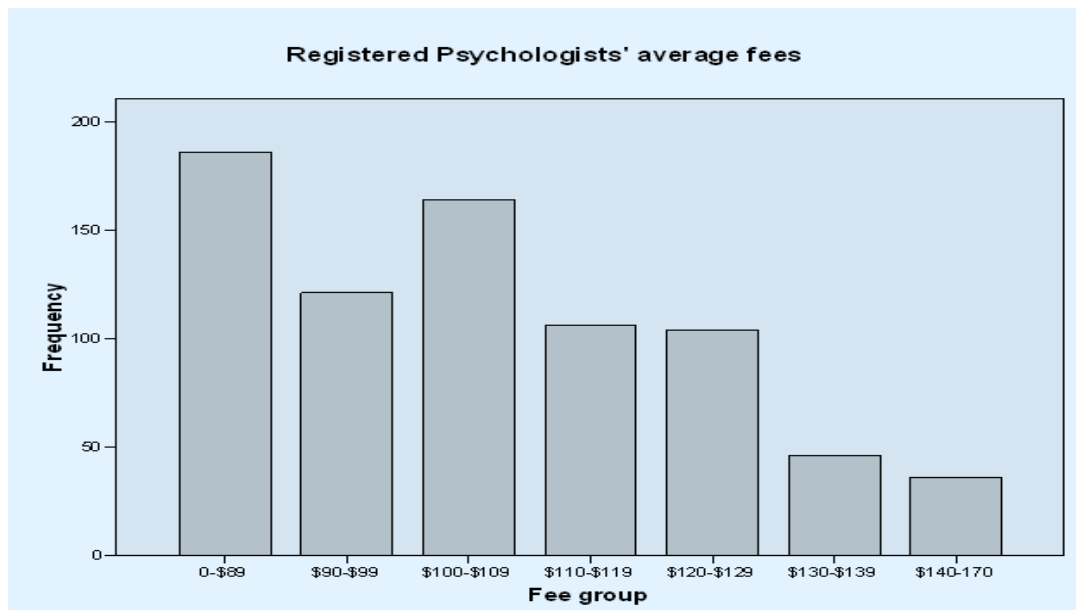
As demonstrated above in figure 1, the data indicates that the average fee charge by the majority of Clinical Psychologists (57%) is at, or below, the Schedule Fee of \$130.



**Figure 2: Analysis of Clinical Psychologists' highest Medicare fees charged.**

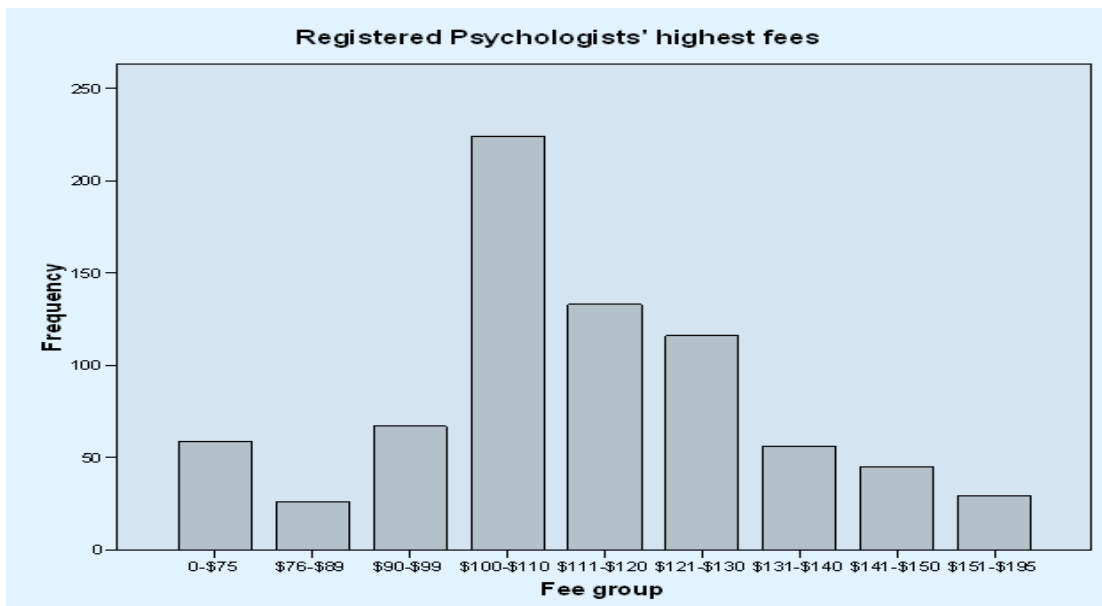
Similar to the data on average fee, almost half of all Clinical Psychologists (42%) highest fee charged is at, or below, the Schedule Fee of \$130. Three quarters of

Clinical Psychologists (77%) highest fee charge is \$150 or less, and only 13% are charging \$160 or more for psychological services to their Medicare clients.



**Figure 3: Analysis of Registered Psychologists' average Medicare fees charged.**

The data for Registered Psychologists shows that the majority of psychologists (59%) average fee is less than \$100. More specifically, almost a quarter of psychologists (24%) charge at or below the Schedule Fee of \$88.20. Only 13% of Registered Psychologists charge more than \$120 for a 50-minute-plus psychological service for Medicare clients.



**Figure 4: Analysis of Registered Psychologists' highest Medicare fees charged.**

The Registered Psychologists (67%) report their highest Medicare fee to be less than \$120. In fact, half of the Registered Psychologists report their average highest Medicare fee at \$110 or lower, and further, 38% of psychologists' average highest fee is below \$100. This should be compared to the Schedule Fee of \$88.20 for Registered Psychologists.

Table 4 and Table 5 present data on psychologists' perceptions of General Practitioner management of Mental Health Care Plans.

**Table 4: Proportion of General Practitioners who do not lodge the correct Medicare consultation item 2710**

	Less than 10%	11-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%	TOTAL
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	
<b>Clinical</b>	266	56	0	0	17	339
<b>Registered</b>	376	76	68	14	35	569
<b>Total %</b>	71%	15%	7%	1%	6%	
<b>Total <i>n</i></b>	642	132	68	14	52	908

In response to a question regarding what proportion of General Practitioners do not lodge the correct Medicare consultation item 2710 the statistics suggest, that generally, psychologists did not perceive this as a problem. The relevance of this issue surrounds the fact that without this “lodgment” the claims of psychologists, or those of their patients, could not be paid. With a total of 908 responses, 71% of Clinical and Registered Psychologists report that General Practitioners lodge the correct form in the majority of cases. Anecdotally, psychologists report a great improvement amongst General Practitioners in activating the rebates for clients.

**Table 5: Proportion of General Practitioners who send the MHCP with the referral**

	Less than 10%	11-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%	TOTAL N
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	
<b>Clinical</b>	25	23	62	60	199	369
<b>Registered</b>	37	34	138	104	429	742
<b>Total %</b>	6%	5%	18%	15%	56%	
<b>Total n</b>	62	57	200	164	628	1111

Only a slight majority of General Practitioners (56%) were reported to send the Mental Health Care Plan (MHCP) together with the referral to psychologists on more than seventy five per cent of occasions.

## Conclusion

This survey attempted to address the issue of access in the community to the new MBS items. The responses received from Psychologists who are providing these services were extremely encouraging. The two aspects of access that were addressed — location and cost of services — evoked very clear messages. Psychologists, both Clinical and Registered, are servicing the regional and rural areas, providing bulk billing, and keeping out of pocket expenses to a minimum.