

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **Psychologists seek Federal budget commitments for vulnerable Australians**

The Federal Government could save \$117.5m through cuts to Medicare-funded mental health services, while still reinstating the right to six additional sessions under exceptional circumstances, according to the Australian Psychological Society, which represents 20,000 psychologists around Australia.

The Government hoped to save \$174.6 million by slashing the number of Medicare-funded sessions with a psychologist under the Better Access to Mental Health Care initiative from a potential 18 to just 10. But a Senate Inquiry last year called on the changes to be delayed because of grave concerns about the estimated 87,000 people with significant mental health problems who would be left without care each year.

An APS analysis has shown that a maximum 16 sessions for those in the most acute distress, along with stricter rules for accessing the additional six sessions under exceptional circumstances, could cut costs while ensuring vulnerable Australians are protected, at a cost of just \$57.1million.

Professor Lyn Littlefield, Executive Director of the Australian Psychological Society, said: "A large number of vulnerable Australians have been left without access to crucial care. With a slight adjustment to the rules and a relatively small expenditure, the Government can protect them, while keeping the cuts it has used for other mental health investments."

She continued: "The heavy demand for Medicare-funded mental health sessions are testament to the immense need in the Australian community. Mental illness has a ripple effect on an individual's family, friends, workmates and community, and it is far more cost effective to intervene early before a person's mental health deteriorates."

She said: "The Better Access to Mental Health Care scheme has given access to mental health care for countless Australians who previously had no means of getting help. Given the increasing social and financial costs of mental health problems in Australia, this effective and cost-effective initiative must be protected."

The proposal is contained in the APS Pre-Budget submission to Federal Government, submitted last month ahead of the setting of the 2012-13 Budget. The Better Access cuts – which came into effect on November 1 last year – were announced in the 2011 Budget.

In its submission, the APS has also called on the Federal Government to invest in:

- greater access to neuropsychological assessments for older Australians, to ensure precise diagnosis of cognitive impairment-related health issues and more cost-effective treatment.
- a scheme to increase psychologists in aged care facilities, to provide psychological interventions to reduce the unnecessary use of medications in the case of dementia, mood disorders and disruptive behaviour.
- psychological sessions under Medicare to help people with chronic diseases change their lifestyle to reduce the severity or effects. New 'health behaviour change' sessions could save 10 times the \$51.4-\$62 million cost estimated by the APS.
- more training of professionals to help reduce the use of restrictive practices in the disability sector.

Professor Littlefield said: "Psychological treatments are effective means of addressing a range of problems and helping to reduce the increasing burden of health costs in Australia. There are a number of ways the Government can take advantage of psychological knowledge to reduce costs and boost the health and wellbeing of Australians."

**- Ends-**

**For a copy of the APS Pre-Budget submission or for other media enquiries please email [media@psychology.org.au](mailto:media@psychology.org.au) or call Judith Heywood on 03 8662 3301 or Rebecca Matthews on 03 8662 3358.**

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*The APS is the largest professional association for psychologists in Australia, representing more than 20,000 members. The APS is committed to advancing psychology as a discipline and profession. It spreads the message that psychologists make a difference to peoples' lives, through improving psychological knowledge and community wellbeing.*