

Submission: Inclusion of Credentialed Mental Health Nurses in the Better Access Initiative

Introduction

Australia's mental health system is currently facing significant challenges, including rising demand for services, workforce shortages, and inequities in access to care. The Better Access Initiative, introduced in 2006, was designed to address some of these issues by subsidising mental health services provided by eligible professionals through Medicare. However, Credentialed Mental Health Nurses (CMHNs), despite their qualifications and capacity to contribute meaningfully to mental health service delivery (Holmes, Windsor & Douglas, 2023), remain excluded from this initiative. This submission argues for the inclusion of CMHNs in the Better Access Initiative as a strategic measure to enhance mental health service delivery across Australia.

Current Role of CMHNs in Medicare

CMHNs are registered nurses who have completed postgraduate qualifications and credentialing. They are currently authorised to provide services under Chronic Disease Management Plans, such as through MBS Item 10956. However, they are not recognised under the Better Access Initiative, which limits their ability to offer subsidised mental health care. This exclusion persists despite evidence of their therapeutic capabilities and their potential to contribute meaningfully to the mental health workforce.

Problem Statement

The exclusion of CMHNs from the Better Access Initiative represents a critical gap in mental health service delivery. The 2020 MBS Review Taskforce acknowledged the need to expand the mental health workforce but failed to recommend the inclusion of CMHNs. This oversight has been criticised as a missed opportunity to strengthen the Initiative's capacity and responsiveness (Australian College of Mental Health Nurses, n.d.).

Systemic Pressures and Missed Opportunities

A 2023 review of the Better Access Initiative highlighted systemic issues such as workforce shortages, particularly in rural and regional areas, long wait times for psychological services, and inequities in access for vulnerable populations. Despite identifying the expansion of the provider base as a potential solution, no action has been taken to include CMHNs.

Proposed Solution:

To address these challenges, this submission proposes the formal inclusion of CMHNs as eligible providers under the Better Access Initiative. This policy change would enhance the

overall productivity of mental health services by optimizing workforce utilization and reducing service delivery bottlenecks.

Benefits of Inclusion

Incorporating CMHNs into the Better Access Initiative would yield multiple benefits. CMHNs are well-distributed across urban and regional settings, which would help bridge service gaps in underserved areas. Their services are cost-effective, offering high-quality care at a lower cost compared to some other providers. Furthermore, leveraging the existing CMHN workforce would alleviate pressure on psychologists and general practitioners (APS, 2023).

Conclusion

The exclusion of CMHNs from the Better Access Initiative represents a significant gap in service delivery. Given their qualifications, experience, and potential to enhance service delivery, their inclusion could be a strategic move to address current mental health system challenges.

Recommendations:

This submission recommends amending the Medicare Benefits Schedule to include CMHNs under the Better Access Initiative. It also advocates for the implementation of pilot programs in rural and underserved areas to evaluate the impact of this inclusion. Finally, it calls for continued support for the credentialing and professional development of CMHNs to ensure delivery, their inclusion could be a strategic move to address current mental health system challenges. Further research and advocacy are needed to support reform in this area.

References

- Australian College of Mental Health Nurses. (n.d.). Position statement: The role of Credentialed Mental Health Nurses in primary care. <https://www.acmhn.org>
- Australian Psychological Society. (2023). What happened with the Better Access review? *InPsych*, Vol. 45, Autumn 2023. <https://psychology.org.au/for-members/publications/inpsych/2023/autumn-2023/what-happened-with-the-better-access-review>
- Holmes, A., Windsor, C., & Douglas, C. (2023). How we got here: A contextual review of the Better Access initiative. *Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.77927>