
Fund counselling under MBS to boost mental health support shortfall

By **STEPHEN LUNN**, SOCIAL AFFAIRS EDITOR

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Lismore-based counsellor and psychotherapist Deborah Banks says it's devastating to see the catastrophic level of untreated trauma being experienced in the wake of the flood.

"It's beyond depression and anxiety. After the first flood there were people walking around in dissociative states even among those not directly hit. There are people having night terrors and flashbacks. Every time it rains, people are triggered," Ms Banks says.

But accessing [mental health services](#) is difficult beyond short-term crisis support, she says, with psychologists swamped and the cost of counsellors like her, whose services don't fall under the Medical Benefits Scheme, often proving prohibitive.

"I've had existing clients who now can't afford to see me because the floods have hit their income. These are people battling PTSD or domestic violence, and now they have an extra layer of trauma," Ms Banks says.

"As for new clients, psychologists in the area have waiting lists of up to 12 months. But they need to see someone now. Many people who have a mental health plan from a GP, or approach me directly, can't afford the fees but, as a sole practitioner, I can't afford to subsidise my fees.

"It's heartbreaking as a therapist because you feel compelled to help," she says.

The lack of access to mental health services, particularly in rural areas, goes well beyond Lismore and the floods.

Two in every three Australians in rural or regional areas experienced an episode of depression or anxiety in the past two years, and one in four said it was a regular occurrence, a new study finds.

But more than 40 per cent of those either didn't seek help or couldn't access support, the survey of more than 2000 people taken in February shows. And professional help was too expensive for almost one in five.

While demand is clear, how to supply more mental health services is contested.

The survey was commissioned by the Australian Counselling Association, which says the government could address the shortfall by adding counsellors and psychotherapists to the MBS. But the Australian Psychological Society says its members should be funded to provide more support.

Australian Counselling Association chief executive Philip Armstrong said requests to the Morrison government to include counsellors and psychotherapists on the MBS had been ignored.

"We could get 3000 counsellors in the system for 12 months, taking on a full client load, and we estimate it would cost the government around \$224m. This is a drop in the ocean considering the huge savings it could create downstream in terms of better outcomes for the patients," Mr Armstrong said.

The full-fee cost of seeing a counsellor is from \$120-\$160 an hour, while the gap fee for a psychologist can be as low as \$40.

APS president Tamara Cavenett acknowledged the important role counsellors play in the community, but said psychologists underwent six to eight years of formal training and graduated "practice ready".

Ms Cavenett said more psychologists could be in the field with just a little more funding.

"Just \$5m in extra funding could see an additional 3500 placement psychologists in the field within the next two years, deployable to areas of most need."

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Stephen Lunn is The Australian's Social Affairs Editor, covering social policy issues including ageing, disability, welfare, immigration and population policy. He has previously been the paper's environment wri... [Read more](#)