

15 May 2024

## Patient risk from untrained professionals

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Expert clinical psychologists are warning of dangers for patients and a “dumbing down” of the mental healthcare profession if plans to introduce ‘psychology assistants’ are realised.

The Institute of Clinical Psychologists and Australian Clinical Psychology Association are responding to indications in the 2024 Federal Budget that ‘psychology assistants’ may be approved to provide care to patients after a 3 or 4-year undergraduate degree, and before dedicated training in mental health.

ACPA President Professor Caroline Hunt said introducing inexperienced, untrained practitioners into an essential and highly complex mental health workforce is a cheap fix, putting patient care at risk.

“Australia has a soaring need for mental healthcare professionals and the shortage of qualified professionals has been flagged with Government for years however, introducing untrained and unskilled practitioners will not get people the care they need,” Prof Hunt said.

“Undergraduate psychology degrees in Australia are science focused. They do not give students the required interpersonal training and clinical skills to make a meaningful contribution to mental health care,” Prof Hunt said.

“The psychology workforce needs meaningful Federal Government funding of post-graduate courses and clinical placements so qualified and safe practitioners can enter the workforce and deliver appropriate care to people with mental health issues”.

President of the Institute of Clinical Psychologists Dr Marjorie Collins, said we have been waiting 18 months for advice from Government on care options for patients with more complex conditions following the halving of available Government-rebated MBS psychology sessions.

“Bandaid solutions like introducing an undertrained workforce, will do little to help people living with mental illness. It ignores advice from experts in the field who have been advocating for improved funding to train professionals and adequate funding of the university sector so we can graduate enough properly trained psychologists.

“The most efficient solution to grow the psychology workforce is to increase places in postgraduate programs by increasing government support for these programs and placement opportunities.

“Graduates from postgraduate psychology programs are job-ready, and able to work competently and independently. Importantly, public safety is built in, as their work is overseen by skilled supervisors, and the health regulatory system. This does not apply to graduates with a 3 or 4 year degree.”

Dr Collins said the Budget announcement left many unanswered questions including where will these assistants work, what work they do, who will supervise them, and how will their practice be regulated?

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