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Working with Government on mental health

The Australian Clinical Psychology Association has been working closely with the new Federal Government and last week ACPA President Prof Caroline Hunt attended the Parliamentary Mental Health Advocacy Day in Canberra and told attendees the cost of inaction addressing mental illness is high.

On behalf of ACPA Members Prof Hunt was able to outline to decision makers the direct economic costs of mental illness and suicide in Australia and that investment in improved mental health outcomes is in fact likely to lead to improved economic outcomes.

Aside from the compelling economic case, we know that growing the clinical psychology workforce and increasing government support of training is crucial if we are to meet the health and wellness needs of Australians.

Already our workforce is around 4,000 clinical psychologists short on planning targets and this increases waiting time for care for Australians. Today, there is an estimated psychology workforce shortfall of 35 per cent and we are seeing a significant geographical maldistribution of the psychology workforce so regional, rural and remote communities are least likely to have access to care.

These stark realities highlight an urgent need for increased Government support for training.

Increasing postgraduate training places is the most efficient and effective way to grow the psychology workforce. It is critical that the mental health workforce is appropriately trained to provide high standards of care, leading to the best outcomes for Australians with mental illness.

At the Advocacy Day Prof Hunt told colleagues that we need to at least double the number of new post graduate psychology registrations in specialised areas annually from around 500 to 1000, so we may close the shortage of around 4,000 clinical psychologists as soon as possible.

ACPA continues to raise these vital issues and call for:

- prioritisation of mental health alongside physical health so postgraduate psychology study may have an urgent injection of funds to meet soaring demand among Australians
- levels of funding for psychology postgraduate professional programs that cover the true costs of training, equivalent to the training of medical practitioners
- a doubling of places so that training capacity can meet workforce shortages within the next 5 (as opposed to 10) years
- slashing student debt for clinical psychologists who commit to work in rural and regional areas, so the mental health workforce is encouraged to head to the bush alongside doctors and nurses
- clear and attractive career pathways within the public mental health sector, including paid registrar position that will provide the incentive for graduates to start their careers in the public sector
- continuation of schemes supporting access to clinical psychologists such as Better Access and Open Arms that provide incentives for individuals to achieve high standards of training and service delivery through a 2-tier system.