

## **What Happened to COAG's Mental Health Reform Agenda?**

Earlier this year, signs were positive for a fresh national approach to mental health reform. At the February COAG (Council of Australian Governments) deliberations, the Commonwealth, States and Territories agreed to develop a joint action plan for mental health reform for release in July.

Joint planning by the two levels of government was not stopped by the Prime Minister unilaterally announcing \$1.9b Commonwealth funding over five years for specific initiatives on 5 April. A new National Plan of Action on Mental Health 2006-2011 (henceforth 'the Plan') was released on 14 July, with all parties as signatories.

States and Territories have been challenged with matching Commonwealth funds yet it is unclear whether this has happened. In the Plan, each State and Territory identifies its separate initiatives and associated funding. Combined, they total roughly \$2.17b, thus exceeding the Commonwealth's \$1.9b. However, this includes \$457.4m for one-off capital works - a third of NSW's 'new' money. Further confusion is added by varying timeframes; WA funding starts in 2004-05 and ends in 2010, not 2011.

Counting dollars distracts from the fundamental question of what reform is actually required and how much this would cost. Additionally, what is really new funding can only be detected by those who know what was already allocated. Unfortunately, neither question is tackled in the Plan.

On a more positive note, the new Plan is refreshingly straightforward in language and presentation. Twelve progress measures are documented ranging from broad indices such as the rate of suicide to the more specific rates of community follow-up within seven days of hospital discharge. Progress in implementation will be monitored by a COAG mental health group in each State and Territory, with Commonwealth representation. The Plan will be independently reviewed after five years.

The Plan identifies five overarching themes:

- promotion, prevention and early intervention;
- integrated care;
- participation in the community;
- coordinated care; and
- increased workforce capacity.

Outcomes sought are:

- reduced prevalence and severity of mental illness;
- reduced prevalence of risk factors;
- increased proportion of people with mental illness getting timely treatment; and
- increased participation in employment, education and training.

Novelties in the Plan include several Commonwealth initiatives such as the radical introduction of Medicare rebates for individual or group sessions with psychologists, social workers or occupational therapists. Another innovation is funding mental health nurses for private psychiatry and GP practices to provide follow-up and medication

management. A third initiative targets the workforce, with extra places and scholarships funded for mental health nursing and post-graduate psychology students.

A major departure for the Commonwealth is direct funding of non-government organisations to employ specific numbers of workers (900 'personal mentors' across Australia) and to provide a specified number of extra places in rehabilitation programs (7,000) and respite care (660). How these numbers were derived is not explained and, as yet, their distribution is unclear given States and Territories vary markedly in their existing non-government infrastructure. Lastly, the Commonwealth is silent about restoring its contribution to funding public housing, severely curtailed in recent years.

The specific State and Territory initiatives show common themes. They include improved emergency responses, more step-up/step-down services, extra acute, forensic and longer-term clinical beds, additional community treatment services, and more housing and support packages, including funding for public housing. However, the level of funds committed varies widely, and it is difficult to gauge their likely impact without knowing in detail what is already in place.

In conclusion, despite its flaws, the Plan is a welcome new commitment to national mental health reform. Its impact will be followed with interest.

The Plan can be downloaded from

[http://www.coag.gov.au/meetings/140706/docs/nap\\_mental\\_health.pdf](http://www.coag.gov.au/meetings/140706/docs/nap_mental_health.pdf)

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