

Submission to COVID Inquiry December 2023

Who I am

I am a psychologist in private practice and I have been working for over 30 years. I have worked in government, non government, private and community organisations as well as solo private practice. My experience has been as a clinician, a Manager, Executive Manager, Local and also State representative on National committees across many fields including the disability sector and mental health.

Covid presented challenges that were unprecedented for myself as a practitioner and also the people I provide a service to. These challenges can be summed up by the following:

Issues and background

- I was also living through the pandemic and all the concerns and precautions that included – while also caring for my elderly mother and trying to keep her safe and my brother who developed serious health issues during covid and they remain and he can no longer work.
- As a sole practitioner service provider I had to navigate all the changes as they occurred at very short notice – this added an extra level of stress and admin and increased my work hours
- We had to find ways to move to telehealth and find platforms that complied with all of the privacy and security laws at very short notice and we had to pay for these on top of our usual business costs
- For a period we were told we had to bulk bill all clients – this didn't cover costs and set up expectations with clients that we had to continually change as the rules changed, including managing non vaxed clients.
- When we could return to face to face there were many additional costs including PPE, sanitiser, air purifiers, extra cleaning between clients etc
- People were in a tough place with the start of the pandemic – however they seemed to have more severe issues in 2022 and this continued this year. Partly as a cumulative impact of many impacts of the pandemic along with people being very tired and stressed from years of managing.
- People being in lockdown, losing loved ones, losing their jobs, being ostracised due to not being vaccinated were all additional issues
- People were not only having issues at home and in their personal lives but also at work where there was a noticeable increase in workplace stress across the board.
- We have supported people through the many natural disasters that have occurred simultaneously with covid.
- The increase in transphobia has left many trans and gender questioning people feeling even more unsafe than before. Practitioners who work with this population also fear for their clients and for themselves professionally.
- The reduction of Medicare sessions from 20 to 10 at short notice while many were on leave made it difficult to prepare for the start of the year and meant most had to do some work in their holidays to stay informed.
- The 10 sessions left people with not even 1 session per month if they started in January – this was not adequate for maintenance let alone doing therapeutic work.
- Add in the massive financial impact on people this year and there wasn't an option for most to fund private sessions – leaving us helping people limp along without being able to offer a lot of practical assistance.
- There has been a significant increase in difficulty with getting rentals during the pandemic in WA, and an increase in homelessness. I have had a number of homeless people I have supported over this time and as a result the only option is to bulk bill them.
- People wait years even if they are on the urgent list. If they make a change to the area they would like to reside in due to having supports around them they are then placed on the bottom of the new waitlist – surely if you have waited then there is a better way. Without an address, people find it difficult to get work and then get hassled by Centrelink as well.
- We have supported the health professionals who had very high stress levels due to their working conditions and the risks they faced.
- The whole area around neurodivergence has exploded and changed during covid – the rules around who can do what (with an evidence base) are unclear; there are different rules for different bodies; and there is a severe lack of both psychiatrists and pediatricians in South West WA leaving people without the ability to get a formal diagnosis.

- There continues to be a split in recognition in psychology and this has limited the access for clients to well trained and experienced psychological help for no evidence based reason.
- I am seeing people now who have long covid with significant and debilitating health issues. There appear to be limited long covid clinics around or information available for people.
- Practitioners have worked harder during the pandemic than ever to assist clients, the community and to keep going, while also living through the issues everyone else has lived through. Many have ended up with health issues themselves and burnout. To date we have not had any support from government in the way of recognising we are a valued resource. Sessions were reduced expecting us to do more with less, and comments were made from the Better Access review that made no sense and did not have an evidence base. For eg government said that people in need did not receive access to services with the extra 10 sessions. People did get access to services, the majority of people still access less than 6 sessions, those with severe or complex needs will use the 20 easily. It makes no sense to offer more people less of a service in an effort to get more people through the door. As it was well put many months ago – you don't offer half a course of antibiotics to 2 people - it is a waste of money and ineffective – you offer people a full course of treatment when they need it, then you can move to less frequent sessions
- In 2023 for some reason Medicare rebates have taken between 2 and 6 weeks to process – this has had a huge impact on low income earners and has further pushed out their ability to attend sessions. If the rebate is processed by practitioners then the rebate is instant – we have to pay for those systems so that is a cost shift and one that not everyone has access to.
- There has been an increase in issues of cybersecurity requiring additional checks and balances and also an increase in insurance premiums
- There have been a multitude of very significant reviews and studies undertaken over the past few years – each time (like with this one) we get asked to provide input – to do it comprehensively and with references etc – this is all in addition to the significant amount of unpaid admin we have to do currently under Medicare, NDIS and various other referral systems.
- Since the pandemic – the majority of providers have been booked out months ahead – yet we continue to get told of online events that are being held a couple of weeks in advance during work time. When nearly every event ends up being during work time in WA – it is almost impossible to plan to go back and view them all especially when many aren't recorded.

Recommendations

- Allow people to provide information in whatever way they can – without the added impost of having to do a formal submission – none of us have time for that
- Recognise mental health professionals have had a huge part to play in getting the country through covid and we have done that with virtually no help at all from government or elsewhere
- Leave Medicare sessions at 20 until a new plan is in place
- Increase the Medicare rebate so practitioners can afford to bulk bill those who can't pay especially during this current financial climate
- Have a national system that allows a rapid turnaround for medicare rebates regardless of the system used
- Have a single secure messaging system that all health professionals can use to transfer information
- Be aware that the impacts of covid are long term and will have consequences if services are not able to support them adequately
- Provide more long covid clinics and information
- Squash hate talk and anti-trans rhetoric including legislation about religious schools being allowed to discriminate on the basis of sexuality and gender
- Clarify and simplify the rules around assessing and diagnosing for ADHD and Autism
- Find ways to increase the number of Psychiatrists and Pediatricians in South West WA
- End the two tier system in psychology to make the most of the workforce that is available and so desperately needed.
- Provide information to professionals in a timely manner – it is not acceptable to notify people of a change in rules 2 weeks before they come into effect on 1 January. This does not allow people to give information to clients and plan sessions accordingly
- Provide multiple times for information sessions that include out of hours options for WA
- Allow provisional psychologists to charge and get a Medicare rebate
- Assist provisional psychologists to get placements – currently it is a huge cost to the individual

