



Addendum to APS submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health dated June 2019

July 2019

Barriers to psychologist uptake of MBS Group Therapy services

There are several obvious barriers to explain the low use of the Better Access group therapy services by psychologists which largely centre on sustainability in the private practice setting. Outlined below are some of the key barriers:

1. A major barrier is the requirement that there are between 6 and 10 participants in the group at all times for group members to be eligible for an MBS rebate. Drop-out rates in group programs can be high^{1,2,3} making it difficult to ensure that there will always be 6 clients present in each session. Where the minimum participant numbers for each session are reduced, the remaining participants are disadvantaged as they are unable to claim a rebate for the session. In addition, establishing a group can be difficult as it requires the psychologist to have the required number of patients requiring the same group therapy content at the same time.
2. Medicare billing can only occur once the service has been provided. If it was possible for the psychologist to bill for a 'group package' (e.g., 10 group sessions) it is possible that there would be a stronger commitment amongst participants to attend all sessions and may reduce drop-out rates.
3. The rebate for group program sessions is very low and unsustainable without the psychologist charging a large gap fee. Running a group program has a range of overheads above that of individual sessions including the need to rent a space large enough to accommodate a group of 6 or more people, marketing to promote the group and attract clients to it, coffee and tea facilities as groups generally include a break allowing group members to interact with each other, and the costs of any other material to be used as part of skill development or group work. In addition, most group sessions are for longer than an hour and require some set up and pack up above what individual sessions do.
4. The administrative component of a group program is very high and includes the need to:
 - Screen participants to ensure suitability (initial session with each participant)
 - Group program planning and delivery (each session)
 - Appropriate record keeping for each group member (each session)
 - Feedback to referrers for each participant (6 session and at completion). The reporting requirement to write back to the referring doctor after the 6th session could be considered unnecessary if for example, the group program runs for 8 sessions requiring another report at

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2268018/>

² <https://bped.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40479-016-0043-3>

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4209079/>

completion. In addition, client attendance may be impacted if they cannot book in to see the referrer for a review between the 6th and 7th group session.

5. Eligibility for the Better Access group therapy services requires that the referring practitioner specify that the referral is for group (not individual) items. Individual therapy services is the default if not specified. This requires clients to return to their GP for a separate referral for group items.
6. Group programs will often have two group facilitators but only one psychologist can claim an MBS rebate for the group session. Having a second facilitator is important in the context of working with vulnerable clients who may become distressed, agitated and in some cases experience emotional dysregulation and have difficulty controlling their behaviours (e.g., programs focusing on anger management, personality disorders).

Recommendations for increasing the use of the MBS group therapy items include:

- Reducing the number of participants required in each group session to 3 in rural and remote areas and 4 in metropolitan areas of Australia
- Allowing larger groups (up to 15 participants) where these are appropriate for the group focus, content and client type (i.e., children, adolescents)
- Allowing for longer group sessions (up to 120 minute sessions)
- Allowing psychologists from more than one service to collaborate on running group programs taking part in both recruiting participants and facilitating the session with a rebate able to be claimed by up to two psychologists
- Increasing the MBS rebate for participants taking part in group programs under Better Access.