

To: Australia Government Productivity Commission, New Inquiry Mental Health

**From: Jane Oakley-Lohm
Balancing of Life**

Counsellor, Clinical Supervisor, Mediator, Project Manager

Experience: Working in Central Australia including remote work for 30 years in diverse roles and positions. Now residing in Tasmania.

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Present issues in the mental health system/ accessing a counsellor/psychologist 7 days a week and out of hours:

- In the north of Tasmania there is a wait time to see a psychologist through the Mental Health Scheme, in some parts of Tasmania this wait time is up to 4 months. Someone that has mental health issues *cannot* wait this long.
- Ongoing out of pocket costs for someone to access support through Mental Health Scheme has risen.
- People can not always attend a face to face appointment due to disability, single parent, time off work, travel component etc
- For most people including people that live rural and remote they cannot easily get access to see a counsellor/psychologist 7 days a week nor out of hours. Yet mental health issues do also occur out of hours and of a weekend.
- Servicing rural and remote areas with an onsite counsellor/psychologist has enormous expenses: Eg relocating, providing housing, salaries with additional benefits, human resources, advertising costs etc

Answer:

Going forward we need to also be proactive as well as cater for the present Mental Health situation.

- Introduction of Counsellors through the mental Health Scheme is going assist with the wait time to see a psychologist. Not everyone requires to be assessed via a psychologist.
- Counsellors can provide a counselling service to monitor clients until they can get into see a psychologist.
- Some clients will not have to continue onto a psychologist saving time and money.
- Use an online Counselling service via phone or Skype that provides a 7 days a week counselling service that can also be accessed out of hours.
- www.balancingoflife.com.au Balancing of Life (BOL) Is an online counselling service that can reach all of Australia including rural and remote locations. All counsellors are insured, Australia qualified, are members of an Australia Counselling association which ensures they have supervision and ongoing training. Costs \$ 60- \$80 an hour.
- As an example: If the BOL counsellors were listed within the Mental Health Rebate Scheme this would allow clients to access a counselling service from all areas of Australia, 7 days a week including out of hours from all areas of Australia with no out of pocket fees to the client.

- This would assist the present wait time to access a psychologist and clients would not have to pay an out of pocket expense, which many people can not afford.

******Immediate change to assist the present mental health issues is to trial Balancing of Life online counsellors which is already set up and operating.***

My personal background of working in Central Australia

1. Due to the shortage of psychiatrists and psychologist in the region I was contracted to the Central Australian Mental Health Association to work with their clients as a counsellor. This worked particularly well being proactive into peoples mental health. I was able to monitor each client, assist them with their day to day difficult tasks, alert the clients psychiatrists / psychologist if the clients had gone off their meds or if the client had a recent experienced that was impacting on the clients immediate mental health well being.

I do feel counsellors have a place to work and provide a counselling service to clients. Counsellors that are members of an Australian counselling body do need to be recognised as providing a professional counselling service therefore they can be accessed via the Mental Health Scheme.

2. Previously I had provided a face to face counselling service to clients living in remote stations and small communities of Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Elliott. There is a need for a counselling service to be ongoing, so that groups of people can build a relationship with their counsellor which is forever accessible. I feel an online counselling service can provide this.

3. Whilst living in Central Australia I managed a project for La Trobe University and the Northern Territory Government on Grief and Loss and how this was impacting the people and the region as a whole. This included the cultures and religions of the health region, one million square kilometres. There are many language groups in Central Australia including 26 Aboriginal language groups.

I researched:

- What is grief and loss for the people of this region
- How were they coping
- Do they have tools to manage their loss
- Are the tools still accessible
- If not what do they require

From this research I made recommendations.

I walked away from this research looking at the traditional cultural ways of dealing with a loss and comparing this to how more modern ways deal with losses, how this is now impacting cultures that are now transforming into modern society. I do have my own theories on this and am happy to share them.