

More time with mental illness patients saves lives

**National Association of Practising Psychiatrists
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Federal government cutbacks whose effect is to reduce the time spent with patients suffering episodes of acute mental illness is preventing a reduction in Australia's suicide rate, said Dr Gil Anaf, President, of the National Association of Practising Psychiatrists.

"More time spent understanding the nature of problems that such patients suffer is an essential requirement for reducing the risk of suicide," Dr Anaf said

"Instead we have a system that is underfunded, and staff who have no time or morale due to the inherent strains of the work made worse by an overemphasis on 'outcomes' that are inevitably code for ideologically driven cutbacks."

Dr Anaf was commenting on recent reports outlining perceived inadequacies in the provision of treatment for patients at risk of suicide, highlighting how the health system is being stretched to the limit.

"Instead of an overarching confidence in the professionalism of a system that politicians and the community value, what we have is an ongoing 'spin' about achieving efficiencies, lack of resources, etc etc, the result being a steady decline in any confidence that we can deliver effective mental health treatment."

Under restrictions introduced in 1996 by federal health Minister, Dr Michael Wooldridge, Medicare rebates for patients visiting their psychiatrists are reduced by 50% once a patient has reached their quota of 50 visits in a calendar year (Item 319 allows 160 visits before the rebate reduction cuts in for a limited number of conditions but excludes many patients suffering depression). Attendances to psychiatrists have decreased since then.

"We need to go back to basics, and focus our attention on the positive outcomes that are to be had when professionals spend time with patients, time to listen and time to bring about a comprehensive treatment strategy that works for the individual. That would, however, require politicians to listen to the evidence being put to them about the effectiveness of intensive treatments," said Dr Anaf.

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