



Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2023–2024

Answer to question on notice

Asked by: Mr Shane Rattenbury MLA

Addressed to: Minister for Mental Health

Reference: Mental Health

Hearing: 11 February 2025

In relation to: Mental Health Care Affordability

Question received: 21 February 2025

Answer Due: 28 February 2025

The Report on Government Services 2025 shows that the ACT has the highest rates of people who delayed seeing, or did not see a health professional at least once in the last 12 months for their mental health due to cost. Across all mental health professionals, including GPs, psychologists, psychiatrists or other professionals, 25.6%± 7.4 people delayed seeing, or did not see a health professional at least once in the last 12 months for their mental health due to cost. In light of this information:

- 1) Why does the ACT have the highest rates of people delaying essential medical care?
- 2) What are you doing to address this issue?
- 3) During the annual report hearings, Minister Stephen-Smith acknowledged that Medicare has not kept up with the cost of services. When was the last time that you spoke to your Federal colleagues about the importance of including mental health care in Medicare?

MINISTER FOR MENTAL HEALTH: The answer to the Member's question is as follows:

- 1) As reported in the Report on Government Services 2025, ACT residents have less access to bulk billed medical services due to lower bulk billing rates and higher out-of-pocket costs than other jurisdictions. The low bulk billing rate of is due to a range of factors including:
 - the impact of the Australian Government freeze on Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) rebates, which means Medicare rebates have not increased in line with inflation;
 - workforce shortages – across all jurisdictions the ACT has the second lowest number of GPs per 100,000 residents;
 - since 2013-14 Australian Government expenditure per person on GPs for the ACT has been the lowest of all jurisdictions; and
 - the increasing cost of running a primary care service – the ACT has high labour costs and higher rent compared to other jurisdictions.

The Australian Government provides some incentives to recruit and retain GPs, but only in rural and remote areas, for which GPs in the ACT are ineligible due to the ACT's classification as a metropolitan area under the Modified Monash Model classification system. I have written to Australian Ministers for Health several times, over several years, seeking their support to restore the ACT's previous classification under the Modified Monash Model, including most recently to the Hon Mark Butler MP, Minister for Health, in April 2024.

- 2) The Australian Government is primarily responsible for funding and policy setting for general practice and primary care.

The ACT Government, both in collaboration with the Australian Government and through its own initiatives, provides a range of supports to improve access to primary healthcare, especially for people experiencing disadvantage or with complex needs who face barriers to accessing timely, high-quality healthcare. A significant proportion of people accessing primary care services funded by the ACT Government experience mental illness.

The ACT Government continues to advocate to the Australian Government for improved funding for primary care and improved access to GP bulk billing and training incentives for the ACT. As noted in the previous question, this includes writing to successive Commonwealth Ministers.

The ACT will monitor the impact of the 22 February 2025 announcement by the Australian Government to expand bulk billing incentives to all patients from 1 November 2025.

- 3) The ACT Government works closely with the Commonwealth Government on matters relating to mental health, including the delivery of the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement.

In the last term of Government, I repeatedly raised primary care issues in the ACT with the Commonwealth Minister for Health and in August 2024 I chaired a joint meeting of Health Ministers and Mental Health Ministers from all jurisdictions to consider the extent of unmet need for mental health and psychosocial supports across Australia, including in the ACT.

Following my appointment as the Minister for Mental Health on 7 November 2024 I met with the Commonwealth Assistant Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, the Hon Emma McBride MP on 19 November 2024 and raised a number of matters with her.

It should be noted that mental health care is "included in Medicare", with the Medicare Benefits Schedule including a number of mental health specific items. Nevertheless, many people accessing specialist mental health care face significant out-of-pocket costs. Access to affordable primary and specialist care is a regular topic of discussion between Health Ministers.

Approved for circulation to the Standing Committee on Social Policy

Signature:



Date:

21/3/25

By the Minister for Mental Health, Rachel Stephen-Smith