

|| AUSTRALIAN PSYCHOLOGY: THE FACTS



According to the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) as of July 2018 there were 36 376 registered psychologists in Australia. Over the past ten years, there has been an increase in representative bodies distinguishing between 'clinical psychologists' (psychologists with a 'clinical' endorsement from the Psychology Board of Australia) and other registered psychologists. This has resulted in a now-commonly held misconception that one small group who make up only 24% of all psychologists, hold greater qualifications, expertise and competency than other practitioners.

The Psychology Board of Australia requires all registered psychologists to meet strict qualifications, training competencies and professional development requirements to maintain registration. The advocacy, which misrepresents psychologists endorsed as 'clinical' as being superior, has resulted in some clients receiving lower Medicare rebates from their preferred choice of psychologist. Clients may also be required to consult a non-preferred psychologist, who may not have specific expertise or understand cultural sensitivities, for important medical assessments for some government departments, e.g., Centrelink, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), WorkCover and the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA).

Why is this important?

Better outcomes are achieved when the client seeking professional mental health care and the preferred psychologist are able to build and maintain a trusting and respectful relationship. Appropriate care, treatment and assessment for clients is compromised when an arbitrary distinction is made between psychologists based on an 'endorsement' which does not consider the full requirements for individual client care. Restricting access to available, competent and qualified psychologists will result in detrimental outcomes for clients.

Psychologists: what is the difference?

All psychologists in Australia must hold general registration. The highest title is 'full general registration' with AHPRA. Once registered, some psychologists choose to apply to the Psychology Board of Australia for endorsement in one or more of nine endorsement areas, one of which is 'clinical' endorsement. However, this endorsement does not equate to a medical specialisation. Over the past ten years, psychologists have increasingly been referred to as either 'clinical' or 'general' psychologists. This is a misrepresentation of skill, knowledge, qualification and expertise.

All registered psychologists must demonstrate competency in diagnosis, assessment, treatment and writing diagnostic reports, regardless of whether they hold a 'clinical' endorsement or not. The quality, skills and knowledge of a psychologist cannot be determined by endorsement status.

While the current criterion for endorsement includes the completion of a Masters degree and two years of supervised practice (Source: <https://www.psychologyboard.gov.au/endorsement.aspx>), when the registration system for psychologists moved from the state-based systems to being federally managed by AHPRA, existing paid members of special interest 'Colleges' were 'grandfathered' into the new endorsement system. Therefore, psychologists endorsed as 'clinical' may not hold Masters or Doctorate degrees. In 2015, Dr Judy Hyde from Australian Clinical Psychology Association found that 'More than half of those clinical psychologists currently endorsed by the Psychology Board of Australia do not have qualifications in clinical psychology...' (Source: <https://industry.gov.au/Office-of-the-Chief-Economist/SkilledOccupationList/Documents/2015Submissions/ACPA.pdf>).

However, many psychologists who are not endorsed as clinical (76% of registered psychologists) do hold postgraduate qualifications such as Masters degrees, PhDs and/or have extensive training and ongoing professional development in particular techniques and therapies.

Who should GP's refer to?

GPs can refer, with confidence, to any registered psychologist (irrespective of endorsement) who has expertise in the area required for a patient's needs, provided that the psychologist has ongoing professional development in that area.

This is supported by a notable research project commissioned by the Australian Government (Pirkis et al, 2011a) which demonstrated that psychologists treating mental illness across both tiers of Medicare Better Access produced equivalently strong treatment outcomes (as measured by the K-10 and DASS pre-post treatment) for mild, moderate and severe cases of mental illness. No difference in treatment outcomes was found between endorsed and non-endorsed psychologists.

Reference: Pirkis, Ftanou, Williamson, Machlin, Spittal & Bassilios (2011a). Australia's Better Access initiative: An evaluation. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 45:726–739

The current state of psychology?

The misrepresentation of the differentiation between psychologists with a 'clinical' endorsement and other psychologists has resulted in a two-tiered Medicare rebate system, two-tier DVA and a proposed two-tier NDIS system for psychological care. This has resulted in inequitable access to services and disadvantages clients whose preferred psychologist does not hold a 'clinical' endorsement.

Currently, psychologists who are endorsed as 'clinical' receive significantly higher rebates than all other psychologists. For example, under the Medicare Better Access program, psychologists with a 'clinical' endorsement are rebated \$124.50 per 50 minute session compared to all other psychologists who receive \$84.80 for the same length session. The unequal rebate has contributed to the demise of many non-clinical training programs and courses, while clinical psychology courses have increased.

Centrelink now only accepts diagnosis and reports for patients with mental illness from psychologists endorsed as 'clinical' and psychiatrists, which has significant disadvantages for lower income clients and those in rural/remote areas, as these practitioners are generally concentrated in larger cities and charge higher fees (Meadows, Enticott, Inder, Russell & Gurr, 2015). Patients with established and trusted relationships with GPs and psychologists are required to seek the services of a psychologist with a 'clinical' endorsement, which has left many patients deeply distressed, perpetuating their mental health issues.

Reference: Meadows, Enticott, Inder, Russell & Gurr (2015). Better access to mental health care and the failure of the Medicare principle of universality. MJA, 202 (4).

The increased advocacy promoting psychologists with 'clinical' endorsement above other psychologists will have long-term detrimental impacts to clients' access to essential services. Without the support of GP's and the government, private practices without 'clinical' endorsement may be forced to close, leaving little option for clients who will face higher costs, longer waiting time and extensive travel to seek appropriate care.

This concern is further enhanced by the Australian Psychological Society's (APS) recent submission to the Federal Department of Health's review of the Medicare Benefits Scheme (MBS). Medicare is the main funding program enabling the Australian public to access psychologists. The APS submission recommends that only psychologists who have been 'endorsed' in selected areas of practice (only 27% of all psychologists*) can claim Medicare benefits for clients presenting with moderate, severe or complex mental health disorders. This represents around 90% of all client referrals. If this proposal is accepted, those in need of psychological help would be severely impacted due to significantly reduced access to competent and qualified psychologists.

*Based on figures from Table 3.2 of the 'Psychology Board of Australia Registrant Data'

What can GP's do?

Registered psychologists provide essential services to the community. Please support your local registered psychologist when making client referrals to ensure accessible services are available now and into the future.

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The Australian Association of Psychologists and 'Australian Psychologists' Facebook Page