



# Australian Health Care Reform Alliance

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## MEDIA RELEASE

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### Mental Health Reform – Unfinished Business

While the final policy commitments of the political parties are yet to be released, the Australian Health Care Reform Alliance encourages all political parties to revisit the challenge of mental health reform. Despite improvements initiated in 2006 by Howard and Lemming, Australia's approach to mental health has become fractured and piecemeal with unacceptable risks for people with a mental illness and their families.

People with mental illness are among the most vulnerable to changes in funding and payment arrangements so continuing support for universal access Medicare-funded mental health services is critical.

Huge problems remain in access to care, particularly for some key groups such as those under 25 years, the elderly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and multicultural communities. This lack of access impacts on our nation's productivity, on people's capacity to finish school, get and keep a job and become contributing citizens. Our broken mental health system leads to unnecessary welfare dependency, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, suicidality, as well as intolerable pain and suffering felt by people and their families.

Devolving responsibility for mental health to Primary Health Networks (PHNs) is a commendable new direction, but it still requires national benchmarking and a Federally co-ordinated concern for equity. The experience of mental health care now varies wildly depending on where you live.

States remain responsible for hospital-based tertiary care though the bar for admission gets higher and higher, hospital budgets are under huge pressure. Nobody is responsible for secondary care in mental health, leaving a massive service gap between the GP and the hospital Emergency Department. The absence of community mental health services creates the gaps through which people fall.

Where CoAG in 2006 suggested a unified response to mental illness across governments and agencies, in fact Australia's response risks becoming more fractured. Despite some progress, countless reviews and inquiries repeatedly characterise Australia's mental health 'system' as being in crisis. This must end.

#### **What we should be hearing from politicians of all persuasions are answers to questions like:**

- How do your policies on mental health aim to strengthen the whole of the system, not just parts? How do your policies specifically foster hospital avoidance to halt Australia's unhealthy and inefficient over-reliance on hospital-based mental health care?
- How will your policies drive the development of a range of community mental health services offering both clinical and psycho-social support which can obviate the requirement for hospital admission/emergency attendance?
- How will your policies promulgate nationwide access to evidence-based, quality mental health services, including in the key areas of mental health promotion and prevention?
- What commitment and resources will you allocate to finally establish a meaningful and robust approach to accountability for mental health in Australia?
- How will you strengthen the voice of consumers and carers in both service and system reform?

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