

Mental health care dip

Clare Armstrong

Fewer Australians accessed subsidised mental health care last financial year despite soaring rates of illness, with psychologists urging Labor to boost the number of Medicare-funded psychology sessions for “complex” patients.

Overall, the number of people who received psychology and psychiatrist appointments, eating disorder treatment plans, GP mental health plans, group psychotherapy and other supports funded through Medicare fell in 2022-23 compared to the prior financial year, according to new Productivity Commission data.

Of the 2.71 million people who did access services, about 26.1 per cent were new patients, down from 26.4 per cent.

The declining rate of new patients accessing different care options in every state and territory except Tasmania has come as a surprise to the sector, which has experienced a consistent rise in demand for mental health support.

The financial year trend for overall services is also at odds with the Health Department recording an increase of 43,544 patients entering the Better Access initiative providing subsidised psychology sessions.

At the end of 2022, Labor cut the number of Medicare-supported psychology sessions from 20 to 10.

Health Minister Mark Butler said the extra sessions had been “bottlenecking” the supply of psychology sessions for first-time patients and that work was underway to improve the equity of the program.

Australian Association of Psychologists president Sahra O’Doherty said the ongoing fallout from Covid and increased stressors such as the cost-of-living crisis had significantly driven up demand.

“We’re looking at massively increased wait times,” she said.

Coalition health spokeswoman Anne Ruston said it was “outrageous” to see Labor cut the number of Medicare-subsidised sessions offered per person during a