

**Public Accounts and Estimates Committee**  
**Inquiry into the 2022-23 Budget Estimates**  
**16 May 2022**

**PORTFOLIO: MENTAL HEALTH**

**Witnesses:**

- Ms Lizzie Blandthorn (Chair)
- Mr Danny O'Brien (Deputy Chair)
- Mr Rodney Barton
- Mr Sam Hibbins
- Mr Gary Maas
- Mrs Beverley McArthur
- Mr James Newbury
- Ms Pauline Richards
- Mr Tim Richardson
- Ms Nina Taylor

**QUESTIONS ON NOTICE**

**QUESTION 1**

- a. **Can you tell me how many Victorians are currently on the waitlist to see a psychiatrist or a psychologist?**
- b. **Included in that then perhaps could you, Minister, provide a breakdown of the wait time by number of weeks or months by specialty.**

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Welcome again, Minister. Speaking of those known pressure points, can you tell me how many Victorians are currently on the waitlist to see a psychiatrist or a psychologist?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Mr O'Brien, we do not have that exact data on hand, but I am happy to take that on notice, and if we can provide that information, we will.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Included in that then perhaps could you, Minister, provide a breakdown of the wait time by number of weeks or months by specialty?

**Mr MERLINO:** Again, if there is further information we can provide, we will, Mr O'Brien.

...

**Mr MERLINO:** Mr O'Brien, sorry to interrupt your question. The Deputy Secretary just reminded me that some of this data is commonwealth data. Again, we will take the request away and work out what we can provide, what is available to us.

*Budget Estimates Hearing Transcript – Mental Health, p. 5*

Name of Committee member asking questions: Mr O'Brien

## RESPONSE

### Answer:

Data on waitlists or wait times to access psychologists or psychiatrists in Victoria is not held by the Department of Health as these waits would generally be in relation to primary care access through Medicare-rebated services such as those provided under a Better Mental Health Care Plan. These services are a Commonwealth responsibility, and as such any data relating to wait times for these services may be held by the Commonwealth. Individual practitioners or organisations may keep their own records for administrative purposes

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) publishes an annual report on patient experiences, which includes information on whether individuals felt that they waited longer than acceptable to get an appointment. This data is not specific to mental health disciplines or to Victoria. ABS experience data also does not provide an estimate of wait times nor quantify the size of waitlists for specific provider types.

Wait times, generally defined as the time between when a referral to a clinician is made and when the consumer has their first appointment, is influenced by a range of factors not reflective of demand. These include:

- Consumers delaying for cost or other reasons (38% of individuals surveyed in 2020-21 by the ABS needing to see a psychologist or psychiatrist and 33% of those needing to see other mental health professionals – mental health nurses, counsellors, social workers, occupational therapists etc.)<sup>1</sup>
- Differing policies on management of wait lists at each service<sup>2</sup>, and
- Variations in recording time of referral depending on the source of referral being internal or external to the organisation where the mental health professional is situated.

### Source:

1. ABS (2021) 'Patient Experiences in Australia: Summary of Findings' available at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/health-services/patient-experiences-australia-summary-findings/latest-release#data-download>
2. Torkki et al. (2002) 'How to report and monitor performance of waiting list management' *International Journal of Technology Assessment in Health Care* 18(3):611-8.

## QUESTION 2

- a. Could you tell me how many specialty child and adolescent psychiatry training positions will be funded from 1 July this year?
- b. Likewise, specialty addiction psychiatry training positions?

Mr MERLINO: We do not have that data on hand, Mr O'Brien, but again I am happy to provide that information.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Likewise, specialty addiction psychiatry training positions?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. I am happy to go into the detail as you have requested, Mr O'Brien, and see if we can provide that for you.

*Budget Estimates Hearing Transcript – Mental Health, p. 6*

Name of Committee member asking questions: Mr O'Brien (Reference: Budget Paper 3, p. 65)

## RESPONSE

### Answer:

There are 16 Advanced Psychiatry training positions to be funded per annum from 2022-23. These will be allocated across priority psychiatry sub-specialties (such as Child and Adolescent; Consultation Liaison; Addiction; Psychotherapy) in consultation with partners including service providers and the Victorian Psychiatry Training Committee.

In addition to the above positions yet to be allocated, four advanced addiction psychiatry training places per annum have been funded in the 2021-22 Victorian State Budget for the new Statewide Service for people with Mental Illness Substance use or Addiction. The department has also provided grants for two addiction medicine and one addiction psychiatry trainee in 2021-22 through the Victorian Medical Specialist Training Program.

### Source:

[Budget papers: Overview, p. 19](#)

### QUESTION 3

**Minister, do you accept that through discontinuing the funding of these additional 100 full-time workers under this initiative more Victorians that are in dire need of drug and alcohol treatment will not receive the treatment they need and will likely relapse?**

**Mr BARTON:** That is what we wanted—we wanted the workforce to hear what you had to say there. But that is great.

**I note this budget has discontinued the \$25 million alcohol and other drugs COVID-19 workforce initiative. This initiative provided an additional 100 full-time alcohol and other drug—AOD—treatment workers across Victoria as well as training and upskilling. It has been cut at a time when demand for alcohol and drug treatment is soaring. Minister, do you accept that through discontinuing the funding of these additional 100 full-time workers under this initiative more Victorians that are in dire need of drug and alcohol treatment will not receive the treatment they need and will likely relapse?**

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr Barton, for your question, and again it is an important one. I have only got 17 seconds—thank you. AOD policy does not sit with the Minister for Mental Health's portfolio but rests with the Minister for Health. But I can provide some insight, and if we do not have the time now, I am happy to follow up with you. There was some COVID-specific funding that has lapsed, but there is a \$54.4 million investment in terms of that integration between mental health and AOD. But I am happy to take that on notice and provide some further information to Mr Barton.

*Budget Estimates Hearing Transcript – Mental Health, p. 10*

**Name of Committee member asking question: Mr Barton**

### RESPONSE

#### **Answer:**

The AOD COVID-19 Workforce initiative has had a specific focus on addressing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This initiative is providing funding across Victoria to increase the number of workers trained and experienced to deliver treatment and support to people with substance use and addiction. These workers are currently connecting with people who have disengaged from AOD treatment during the pandemic, or who might have had to wait longer for residential treatment because of essential public health measures.

The training provided under this initiative throughout 2022 to new recruits and existing workers provides them with up-to-date and accredited skills and will allow them the opportunity to apply for unfilled positions that currently exist within the sector.

The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System recommendations will drive reform that will fundamentally enhance both AOD and mental health service access and responses. This will also give rise to additional workforce requirements. The AOD COVID-19 Workforce Initiative is creating a pipeline of potential workforce which can contribute to the successful implementation of these longer-term reforms.

#### **Source:**

Budget Paper 3 – 2020-21

## QUESTION 4

**Can I start by asking: did you respond to any of the six letters to you? So they wrote to you six times asking for money. Did you reply?**

**Mr NEWBURY:** Thank you, Minister. If I can pick up just finally on something that the Deputy Chair was talking about. He was talking about the association of psychologists' testimony from last week. They are seeking funding from the state. I know that the answer went to the federal—but the state. Can I start by asking: did you respond to any of the six letters to you? So they wrote to you six times asking for money. Did you reply?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Mr Newbury. I know, speaking to my office, we have been searching for that correspondence. I will take this on notice because I have requested a search for that correspondence. I can tell you at this committee that almost all of the issues that they have raised are federal responsibilities—not without merit—and I encourage them to engage with the federal government. Indeed at a national level states and territories can as well, but most of the issues are federally related. In terms of the correspondence, if there is further information I can provide to you, I will.

*Budget Estimates Hearing Transcript – Mental Health, p. 12*

**Name of Committee member asking questions: Mr Newbury**

## RESPONSE

### Answer:

The department has sought information from the Australian Association of Psychologists Inc (AAPi) about the specific details of the communication referenced in its evidence to the Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee. To date the AAPi has been unable to locate or provide copies of prior correspondence. The last noted correspondence from AAPi to the Minister for Health and Minister for Mental Health was received in 2021 regarding the obligations of personal protective equipment (PPE) use during the pandemic for psychologists, which was responded to at the time.

Publicly available details on the AAPi website in relation to the use of provisional psychologists included its proposal that a 'Provisional Psychologist' Medicare rebate be established which would allow around 6,000 provisional psychologists who are in the last stages of supervised practice to immediately boost the workforce, and that additional funding be provided to allow supervision for provisional psychologists.

Recommendations relating to changes to the Medicare rebate, and suggestions for provisional psychologists to access a new rebate are the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government.

The Victorian 2022-23 Budget is investing \$55.7 million in training more than 300 psychology registrars in public health settings. This Budget will support psychologists and other allied health workers to undertake advanced training through the continuation of the \$1.3 million postgraduate scholarship program launched in 2022<sup>1</sup>.

The psychology registrars' program will continue the two-year training model as designed by the sector, including engagement with the Victorian Psychology Association. This includes psychology educator positions that will work on a 1:5 ratio to support a robust learning program and to meet the supervision requirements of the Psychology Board of Australia. The supervision includes a combination of individual and discipline specific group supervision with new psychology registrars. The structure of the psychology

<sup>1</sup> [Victoria's Mental Health and Wellbeing Workforce Strategy 2021-2024](#), p. 12

registrar programs requires that services provide a safe and supported learning environment, to ensure that the registrars have a positive experience within the public mental health system and to support workforce retention.

Funding for a new clinical supervision program will provide clinicians with an experiential learning program that builds skills of educators, improves the quality of supervision and experience of new recruits into the system and supports wellbeing through provision of reflective practice.

This builds on previous investment to support 60 allied health graduates trained in mental health each year, including psychologists.

**Source:**

[Budget papers: Overview, p. 19](#)

[Victoria's Mental Health and Wellbeing Workforce Strategy 2021-2024, p. 12](#)