

Eligibility for relationship counselling under Medicare

The APS Professional Advisory Service frequently receives calls from members unsure if relationship counselling is an allowable use of a Better Access Medicare item.

It is important to note that the intent of the Better Access initiative is to provide evidence-based treatment to people with a diagnosed mental illness. The Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) provides clear conditions for providing Medicare-funded psychological treatment under Better Access.

The Medicare items can only be used for the delivery of psychological services to people with a diagnosed mental disorder.

The conditions classified as mental disorders under Better Access are informed by the World Health Organisation (1996) Diagnostic and Management Guidelines for Mental Disorders in Primary Care: ICD-10 Chapter V Primary Care Version. Relationship difficulties are not regarded as a mental disorder.

Many clients with diagnosed and eligible mental health disorders who are referred to psychologists under Better Access will also have relationship difficulties. However, the MBS indicates that the focus of the psychological treatment for such clients must be the presenting mental health disorder.

The APS has been made aware that some GP referrers provide both members of a couple with Mental Health Treatment Plans in order to obtain Medicare-funded relationship counselling under Better Access. The APS has been advised by Medicare that the situation where both members of the couple have Mental Health Treatment Plans does not facilitate the delivery of relationship counselling.

Written advice to the APS from Medicare is that a professional service must be personally performed by a single practitioner on not more than one patient on one occasion; that is, two or more patients cannot be attended to simultaneously.

What does this mean in practice?

According to the current Medicare arrangements, the provision of relationship counselling does not constitute the valid use of a Better Access item. Relationship counselling does not fulfil Medicare requirements even when a mental disorder is present in both parties, because having two clients in the same consultation would

not meet the requirements of the Better Access item descriptor.

Members may wish to briefly involve the partner of a client at some point during the course of treatment of an individual, if therapeutically indicated, but this should not comprise the primary focus of a course of treatment under Better Access.

This information first appeared in a 'Comfortably Complaint' article in April 2015 InPsych, it is current as at October 2017.