



# ALSA

**AUSTRALIAN LAW STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION**

30 July 2010

To the Prime Minister, the Hon Julia Gillard, MP

The Australian Law Students' Association (ALSA) is the peak representative body for law students in Australia. We are writing to express our concern over shortfalls in funding for mental health services aimed at young adults in their 20s, which covers the majority of the approximately 28 000 students whom we represent.

Law students are especially affected by mental health problems and stand to suffer more than other young members of the community from the lack of funding for youth mental health services. A recent study conducted by the Brain and Mind Research Institute at Sydney University has shown that 41% of law students suffer from psychological distress severe enough to justify clinical assessment, and that the incidence of distress among law students is significantly higher than among the general population.

Our law school communities are working to address this problem, and we ask the Federal Government to do the same by providing funding that will enable an increase in the number of mental health services available to young adults.

Mental health issues are a significant drain on the community and the economy. In a 2007 review of the burden of disease and injury in Australia, mental health issues were found to be the third largest contributor to loss of productivity and life. Ten percent of community morbidity can be attributed to mental health problems and the leading cause of death for persons under the age of 44 in Australia is suicide. Acknowledging these figures, in 2006 the Senate Select Committee inquiry into mental health called for an increase in allocation of the health budget to 9-12 per cent by 2012.

We would argue that addressing the needs of young adults with mental health problems is the most effective means of reducing this burden. As Professor Ian Hickie highlighted in an address at Sydney University, people around the age of 22 are at the peak of their potential productivity, and from an economic point of view, represent the highest point of government investment. Providing good mental health services is an important means of supporting the productive capacity of young adults and thereby ensuring the highest return on government investment.

This is particularly important for the law students we represent, where anecdotal evidence suggests that some law students suffering from untreated mental illness never enter the workforce, which could account for the 'improvement' in mental health statistics for practicing lawyers as opposed to law students. This is not only a human tragedy and a social problem, but also a serious economic problem as a significant government investment into the education of these students is lost to preventable mental illness.

Unfortunately, it is in the early years of adulthood that most mental health problems have their genesis, with up to a quarter of people between the ages of 16 and 26 suffering from a diagnosable mental illness at any one time. It is at this age that prevention and early intervention

have the most impact in preventing lifelong disability. The aforementioned Senate inquiry found that the most significant issue arising from the provision of mental health services to young adults was the extent of unmet need. Only a quarter of young people seeking care had access to services.

The 2 per cent of the health reform spending increase (\$178 million) directed at mental health does not take into account the above considerations. Nor does it acknowledge that mental health is as important as physical health to the overall health and well being of Australians. While we would support the Government's proposals to fund early intervention models and other youth friendly services, we are concerned that the amount of funding allocated is inadequate. We ask that the allocation of funds be reconsidered in recognition of the potential cost to society of a failure to provide sufficient mental services for young people.

In particular such an increase in funding should be used to strengthen the youth mental health model, premised upon the twin pillars of Headspace centres providing a one-stop shop for youths with mild to moderate mental illness, and Early Psychosis Prevention and Intervention Centres (EPPIC), which provides the same services for more serious illness, and make both of these pillars available to all young people in Australia as quickly as possible. We note that the Government has promised to increase the number of Headspace centres, but these centres need to be able to provide more services and such centres cannot function effectively without the support of EPPICs for more serious illnesses, which is currently lacking.

We welcome the Government's election promise of immediate spending on a suicide prevention package if returned to office, but strongly urge you to increase mental health expenditure far beyond what has been promised so far to fund the measures outlined above.

We ask that as the 2010 Federal Election approaches, you consider further investing in the mental health of Australia's youth and help not only us but all communities to ensure that the future of our country's youth is as bright and healthy as possible.

Yours Sincerely

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