



Psychologists 'cut health costs'

By Peter Jean
Health Reporter

Having psychologists work alongside GPs in general practices could help reduce the severity of mental illnesses and the need for some patients to be medicated, an international psychology conference in Melbourne has been told.

Since 2006, more than two million Australians have been able to get a Medicare rebate for psychological services under a program which allows GPs to develop mental health plans for patients and refer them for a limited number of psychologist appointments.

Monash University research fellow Robyn Vines told the International Congress of Applied Psychology that psychologists should work on-site with GPs to provide early-intervention care for patients with common mental disorders. "Much of the collaborative care is off-site, rather than on-site, and I think the on-site location makes a heck of a difference in terms of the GP feeling confident to talk about and discuss interrelated treatment [with a psychologist]," she said.

Dr Vines said she had noticed that GPs who worked regularly with psychologists were less likely to immediately prescribe medication to some patients with conditions such as mild depression.

"We always used to see patients several weeks after they had been given anti-depressants to give the anti-depressants time to kick in," she said.

"Now what happens is the GPs refer to us first and then we discuss whether medication is needed. So it's a total change in behaviour."

The conference was told that Norway was moving towards incorporating psychologists into primary care, which was more cost-effective than waiting for patients to require expensive secondary or hospital care for mental health problems.

Norwegian Psychological Association president Tor Levin Hofgaard said teenagers with mild to moderate depression could miss months of school and become more withdrawn while they waited to access to mental health services.

"If you establish a primary care system with psychologists you probably need

something like two to five hours of treatment before your treatment has ended and you're back at school," he said.

Dr Hofgaard said attitudes towards mental health in Norway had changed since the 1990s, when the then prime minister, Kjell Magne Bondevik, took leave because he was suffering from a depressive illness.

The current Norwegian health minister said recently that he would rather have an extra 1000 new psychologists in primary care than the more than 2000 extra doctors which had been requested by the Norwegian Medical Association.

Dr Vines said collaboration between doctors and psychologists could be encouraged by having GP and psychology registrars complete some of their training together.

She said a blow-out in demand for Medicare-funded appointments with psychologists showed there was unmet need for the service.

"This is driven by consumer and patient need. It's not driven by the promotion of a particular profession for the sake of it," she said.