

MEDIA RELEASE

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Mental health support must be a key factor in disaster recovery

Australia's peak psychology body has welcomed the Prime Minister's announcement of a national recovery agency but is calling for mental health treatment to be recognised as a key aspect of disaster recovery.

Responding to today's announcement on the creation of the National Recovery and Resilience Agency, Australian Association of Psychologists' (AAPi) Executive Director Tegan Carrison said its members wanted the current bushfire Medicare item numbers extended to include any large scale disaster, pandemic or traumatic event; and for self-referral to be made available.

"The Prime Minister said the impact of disasters in the long term can be devastating and even deadly. Our members, as psychologists, understand how important it is to seek out quality care as quickly and easily as possible, when recovering from a disaster, and in building resilience.

"Extending the current Medicare item numbers pertaining to bushfires to cover any major disaster will ensure the community's mental health is adequately cared for during a time of crisis," Ms Carrison said.

"Unfortunately natural disasters and traumatic events are a part of life. In recent years we have experienced bushfires, floods, cyclones and now the Covid-19 pandemic. We are calling on the government to be proactive in establishing trauma and disaster recovery item numbers so that people can receive the support they need, when they need it.

"There is excellent research that indicates that if early intervention and support is accessed, future negative impacts are reduced."

Ms Carrison said the AAPi was calling for:

- Medicare rebates made available for up to **10 individual mental health services** in a calendar year.
- **No referral required.** Patients are not required to have a diagnosed mental health condition, GP mental health treatment plan or referral prior to requesting psychological services. They may also self-identify as being affected by bushfire (or other kind of natural disaster) and request a service. Ms Carrison said this reduces barriers to access and reduces costs for everyone (clients do not need to pay to see GP, reduces administration time and reduces Medicare spend).
- Patients wishing to access services via **video conference** are not required to have an existing relationship with the treating practitioner. In addition, no minimum distance requirement applies to these video conference services.

- Mental health services received under the trauma and disaster recovery items do not count against a patient's quota of services under the Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the MBS (Better Access) initiative.

Tegan Carrison is the Executive Director of the Australian Association of Psychologists Inc (AAPi), a not-for-profit peak body for psychologists in Australia.

About Australian Association of Psychologists Inc (AAPi):

The AAPi is a not-for-profit peak body for psychologists that aims to preserve the rich diversity of psychological practice in Australia. Formed in 2010 by a group of passionate grassroots psychologists, the AAPi's primary goal is to address inequality in the profession and represent all psychologists and their clients equally to government and funding bodies. Its primary mission is to lobby for equitable access for the Australian public to professional psychological services funded under the current Medicare Better Access Scheme.

About Tegan Carrison, Executive Director, AAPi:

Tegan has spent over 15 years in public health promotion and is passionate about advocating for the rights of health care professionals and improving access for the community. After studying Nutrition and Health Promotion at Deakin University, Tegan went on to become an experienced clinical educator, supervisor, and mentor, including starting a student-led interprofessional clinic with the University of Queensland's not-for-profit UQ Health Care. Tegan also brings a wealth of experience in business management, administration and human resource management. She is passionate and dedicated to improving access to mental health services and creating the leading members association for psychologists in Australia.