

Response to the Psychology Board of Australia
Re: Consultation paper on registration standards and related matters
Issued 27 October 2009

Response due date: 24 November 2009

'Attention: Chair, Psychology Board of Australia' at natboards@dhs.vic.gov.au

Dear Sir

I am writing this letter to pass on some information about my personal practice and experience as a Private Psychologist in rural Victoria.

I live in a small rural town of Echuca, which is two and a half hours from the centre of Melbourne. The population is 12,000 and services here cover rural regions as far away as Hay (2.5 hours), Barham (1.8 hours), Kerang (1 hour), Cobram (1.5 hours) and all places in between.

As you are probably aware through the experiences of GP's it is difficult to get professionals to move to regional areas to work. It is sadly the same story for Psychologists.

I moved here 14 years ago to start up a small practice. The reason I moved was because I was a new graduate and I had been told there were only two psychologists in town working a combined 3 days a week and there was plenty of work available. I contacted these psychologists and formed a good relationship with them. Shortly after I moved here however one of the psychologists moved to the city because she wanted to do further study.

Over the 14 years I have been here the psychologist population has waxed and waned frequently. Some of us have remained consistently but others have moved through the area due to non availability of professional opportunities in training and support in the rural areas. However at all times we have always had enough work to support us in whatever capacity we wanted to work.

In the year 2000 I decided I wanted to cut down my hours to 4 days a week and worked 4 days until early 2007 when I found there were too many clients and I needed to work the extra day to provide an adequate follow-up service. At this time there were 4 full time psychologists and 2 psychologists working 1-2 days a week in the area. There are also several psychologists and counsellors working for the public service. We were all very busy and as one of the full time psychologists I could see up to 35 clients a week. This means that I would see up to 8 clients per day working an average of 10 hours a day 5 days a week. I take a small break of one week 3 times a year and a week and a half at Christmas. To take longer breaks throws my service into chaos.

We get most of our referrals from GP's and through legal avenues. Our client population exists of 20% workcover or TAC, 10% Victims of crime, 35% EAP programs, a very small percentage of clients came without GP referrals and the remainder Medicare.

The other consideration for our region is that we have never charged the full APS recommended fee. This is a choice we make individually but all agree on in principle. The average fee charged in this area is \$100 per session. Very few of us bulk bill health care cardholders.

When we were at full capacity, 4 full time and 2 part-time, only one of us was a clinical psychologist. Over the past 6 months 2 full time psychologists have left the area. The clinical psychologist has moved to Qld. The other psychologist has moved to Shepparton to take up a position with Community Mental Health because she did not feel secure in her job. Although there were ample clients she was concerned about the changes being made in all areas of psych registration and knew if she stayed in the private sector she would have to participate in further study. She joined Mental Health for security.

During the last two years another psychologist has undertaken to do her masters and is in the process of completing the supervision side of things to be a registered as a clinical psychologist. However, unfortunately the time away from her practice to attend university 3 days a week in Melbourne for 2 years has led to her business becoming financially unviable and she is now moving back to Melbourne to be closer to study options.

This same psychologist also advertised for 2 years to get another psychologists to work for her in the region and did not receive any applicants. Although she advertised extensively she could not attract anybody to the region to work. Over the last 6 months my waiting list has blown out to 6-8 weeks. The other part-time psychologists still here have either closed their books or have similar waiting lists. The doctors have not stopped referring but clients have to travel up to 2-3 hours from the outlying regions and up to an hour from Echuca itself to access psychologists in the two main centres of Bendigo and Shepparton.

I hope that my brief explanation of our experience as rural providers gives you some insight into the difficulties faced by people in the rural sector, both as clients and as professionals. I hope also that there will be some consideration made for professionals working in rural and remote areas when major decisions are made.

Judi Bilkey

Private Psychologist

Victoria