Handout 9: Service Providers in the Mental Health Sector

Services can be provided by the Commonwealth or State governments, by private companies, or by non-government organisations. Current thinking in the mental health field stresses the importance of cooperation between by the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Commonwealth Government

The role of the Commonwealth Government is primarily that of providing funding. This includes funding of strategies contained in the National Mental Health Policy and Plan (1992) (you can find the web address for this site in the library), and a number of mental health related services that are part of the Disability Services Program, Home and Community Care (HACC) and the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program. These programs provide interventions such as accommodation support, respite care, living skills training and support and home help, among other services.

State Governments

State Governments are the primary providers of services such as crisis/extended hours services, community mental health teams, mental health inpatient facilities (psychiatric hospitals, general hospital services, community-based treatment beds) and group homes.

Limitations include:

• Insufficient funding to the mental health sector to meet the needs of consumers and carers
• Shortage of psychiatrists in the public sector
• Imbalances in resourcing, (such as between urban and rural areas)
• Shortage of specialist services for particularly vulnerable groups such as children and adolescents, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the elderly, refugees and the homeless
• Over-closing of long term inpatient facilities

Private

These include psychiatrists in private practice, and private psychiatric inpatient/outpatient services. As well, doctors in general practice are frequently the first point of contact with the medical sector for people who are affected by a mental illness and/or their carers.

Limitations include:
Psychiatrists in private practice are less likely to deal with people with severe mental illnesses

Private inpatient care is generally only affordable for those with private health insurance

Access to private psychiatric services concentrated in Australian capital cities

General practitioners may not have the training to identify and appropriately treat people with a mental illness

Non-government Sector

Not-for-profit, community based services provide a wide range of important non-medical services to people with a mental illness and their carers: accommodation, advocacy, rehabilitation and support programs. These services are often more immediately responsive and flexible to consumer needs than government services, and community managed non-government services place a large emphasis on consumer participation and community control.

Limitations include:

- Funding restrictions can limit number of staff and range of programs
- Policy of deinstitutionalisation means they are being asked to provide expanded services with extremely limited, and sometimes dwindling, resources, even though governments are relying increasingly on their services
- Training of staff in non-government organisations in relation to the area of mental illness may be inadequate