

SANE Australia challenges the ALP and Coalition to show vision and leadership on mental health reform

An analysis of the major political parties' election promises on mental health, conducted by SANE Australia, has found that both policies lack vision and take a narrow and superficial view of the complexities of mental health.

The national mental health charity has challenged both the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and Coalition parties to double funding for mental health in real terms within five years - to achieve parity with physical health funding - and to resolve the Federal/ State tussling which it claims has poisoned progress for decades.

SANE has also called for cooperation across government departments so that needs such as housing, education, employment and justice are tackled together, not in isolation.

'Everyone who needs help for mental illness should get treatment and support as early as possible, for as long as needed, and in the community where they live,' says the Executive Director of SANE Australia, Barbara Hocking. 'In Australia today, this is far from reality for people with mental illness.'

Ms Hocking says the ALP plan, which she describes as 'a loose grouping of services' under the heading *Mental health: taking action to tackle suicide*, is welcome news.

'However, the \$277 million budget over four years equates to a timid increase of under 3 percent per annum, when you consider the annual cost of mental health services is over \$4 billion a year.

'The Coalition's *Real Action Plan on Mental Health* which would commit \$1.5 billion over the same period, is also welcome news, but the major focus on "beds" betrays an outmoded hospital-oriented mentality, ignoring the fact that mental health services are overwhelmingly provided in the community, where increased funding is also urgently needed,' says the Executive Director.

'It is time all political parties recognised that an effective national mental health strategy is an essential component of a suicide prevention strategy,' Ms Hocking adds.

SANE Australia has identified five key areas requiring mental health reform. In each of these, the parties' policies have been found wanting:

- **Vision and leadership** – neither party has given convincing evidence yet of vision and leadership on mental health reform.
- **Clinical services** – Both major parties have made welcome commitment to a range of clinical services. Both focus on narrow areas, primarily youth services and 'more beds', and need to broaden to adequately fund community-based services helping people of all ages.
- **Community support** - Both parties have supported initiatives in this area, but neither election manifesto recognises that it remains greatly underfunded, ill-coordinated and patchily implemented, especially because of needless Federal/ State complexities in service delivery.
- **Family and carer support** - Both parties' attitude to family and other carers of people with a mental illness is patronising and inadequate. Neither indicate they are even aware of the value of evidence-based family training.
- **Community awareness** - The ALP has committed to improving awareness where there is a risk of suicide, by funding workplace initiatives and crisis support for Lifeline, for example. There is no commitment to broad improvement in community attitudes, however, as recommended in the *National Mental Health Strategy*. The Coalition is silent on this issue.

Ms Hocking also welcomes the Australian Greens' *National Health Plan*, which calls for a Minister for Mental Health and \$350 million annually for mental services. However she says more detail is needed on how the funds would be allocated.

SANE Australia

A national charity working for a better life for people affected by mental illness.

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