

Mental Health and the Federal Election 2010

SANE Australia calls for the rolling out of a comprehensive national mental health strategy, properly funded to be fit-for-purpose – and compares this to what the ALP and Coalition have offered so far . . .

SANE Australia calls for the national mental health strategy to be appropriately funded and implemented – ensuring that everyone who needs help for mental illness will get treatment and support as early as possible, for as long as needed, and in the community where they live.

We need the Federal and State governments to work together more effectively, to ensure that this help is provided as seamlessly as possible.

We need cooperation across government departments so that needs such as housing, education, employment and justice are tackled together, not in isolation.

And it is fundamental to acknowledge that investment in mental health services is an essential suicide prevention strategy.

In contrast, what is on offer so far from the two major parties in the 2010 election?

Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, has announced the ALP plan: a loose grouping of services under the heading 'Mental health: taking action to tackle suicide'. It has a price-tag of \$277 million over four years.

This is welcome news. However, the annual cost of mental health services is over \$4 billion a year, so the new funds equate to a timid increase of under 3% per annum – roughly equivalent to a CPI increase.

Tony Abbot, meanwhile, has announced that the Coalition's 'Real Action Plan' would commit \$1.5 billion to mental health over the same period, concentrated on youth services and '800 mental health beds'.

This is welcome news. However, the major focus on 'beds' betrays an outmoded hospital-oriented mentality, ignoring the fact that mental health services are overwhelmingly provided in the community, and this is where increased funding is also urgently needed. The vast majority of people with a mental illness rarely go to hospital, and then typically for a few weeks only. It is day-to-day care and support in the community that is required more than anything. The impressive billion-plus figure is also not 'new' money, but funds taken away from other health programs which the Coalition would slash, including GP services and the important ehealth initiative.

This superficial treatment of mental health concerns in the election run-up is especially frustrating because – as SANE Australia and advocates such as Ian Hickie, Pat McGorry and John Mendoza have repeatedly pointed out – a framework for progress already exists in the Recommendations of the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission, and the Fourth National Mental Health Plan, both completed in 2009, gathering dust, and still awaiting implementation.

SANE Australia challenges the ALP and Coalition to show leadership on this issue, including commitment of adequate funding to mental health services in Australia.

We ask them to commit to 'real action' to 'move forward' promptly on this issue if elected to form the next Government.

Reform is needed in five key areas, outlined in the following table overleaf.

THE ISSUES	A SANE PERSPECTIVE What we need, and how the ALP and Coalition rate
Vision and Leadership	<p>Australia needs strong leadership to implement an effective national mental health strategy, including agreement to double funding in real terms within five years (to achieve parity with physical health funding). This includes tackling workforce issues and accountability, and resolving the Federal/ State tussling which has poisoned progress on this issue for decades.</p> <p><i>Neither party has given convincing evidence yet of vision and leadership on mental health reform.</i></p>
Clinical services	<p>Clinical services for people with mental illness are operating in crisis mode all around the country, underfunded and grossly understaffed. In addition to well-supported GPs, psychologists and others who provide psychological treatments, we urgently need comprehensive, properly-funded area mental health services. They need to be focused on treating people in the community where they live (not preoccupied with hospital services, reflecting an outmoded, 19th-century model of care).</p> <p><i>Both major parties have made welcome commitment to a range of clinical services. Both are focused on narrow areas, however – primarily youth services and ‘more beds’ – and need to broaden to adequately-funded community-based services helping people of all ages.</i></p>
Community support	<p>Australia needs a network of properly-funded, coherently-planned community support services for people living with a mental illness – accessible, culturally-sensitive, and involving people with mental illness and their families. These include supported accommodation, rehabilitation, personal helpers, education, training and employment support.</p> <p><i>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.</i></p>
Family + carer support	<p>Families provide a vast army of 24/7 unpaid carers. Research shows that evidence-based training and support for families makes a significant difference to clinical outcomes, as well as helping them cope better. This training needs implementing systematically as an integral part of treatment throughout Australia – especially in regional and rural areas which are severely under-served.</p> <p><i>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.</i></p>
Community awareness	<p>Australia needs a comprehensive, long-term and community-wide community education initiative to tackle misunderstanding and stigma. By its nature this will also be a suicide prevention strategy. However, such efforts will be wasted if inadequate mental health services continue to leave too many people without effective treatment, support or adequate housing.</p> <p><i>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 support for broad improvement in community attitudes, however, as recommended in the national mental health strategy. The Coalition is silent on this issue.</i></p>