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# Small or solo practices unfit for managing chronic disease



[David Rowley \(/author/david-rowley\)](#) 27 November 2015



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IF YOU want to be involved in chronic disease management, you'll need to be part of a multidisciplinary team chosen by a Primary Health Network and it will be no place for single practitioners or small GP practices.

Professor Ian Hickie (pictured), a mental health commissioner and one of the key architects of the mental health review informing the government's radical policies announced yesterday, repeatedly spoke of "disruption" during the brief post-announcement press conference.

Speaking to *Medical Observer*, he explained what he meant.

"I think the issue for people who run small or solo practices is, are they the best mode of practice for complex and chronic disease management? And my answer would be no," he said.

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The key elements of the 25-page government response to the earlier review include reallocating existing funds with PHNs to commission coordinated mental health packages for people with severe and complex needs, the aim being to boost localised care.

Professor Hickie said the fundamental changes mapped out in the response "will be true not just in mental health but across the whole chronic disease spectrum".

Although much of the detail is yet to be finalised, he said PHNs would "contract" groupings of GPs, psychologists, psychiatrists, additional mental health nurses, social support and whatever else was needed for chronic patients.

"It hasn't been worked out how, but it will require providers to put propositions to the PHNs about who the providers actually are and the combinations and care they will offer," he said.

"They will then contract through the PHN to provide these.

"New providers will be able to put together teams which are suited to [the patient's] needs and [the patient] will have the choice of 'cashing out' what would otherwise have been spent on MBS," he said.

"In the youth area, if a person would have otherwise had 10 sessions of therapy for about \$1000 under Medicare, that \$1000 can be cashed out to the relevant headspace or equivalent, and they'll be able to hire the relevant [people] rather than working through their Medicare items in isolation.

"You then have those things working in an organisational framework, an enhanced primary care organisation. The GP as part of a larger organisation is paid as part of that organisation."

Professor Hickie described it as a golden opportunity for GPs.

"In the rollout of this, what the government and PHNs will be looking for are those that have the capacity to develop this, get on board first, develop the model, work out how best to do it, then share that experience with others," he said.

But he admitted there is "anxiety" within the mental health community about whether the 31 barely five-month-old PHNs are "up to the task".

He also said certain elements might not work.

"[The PHNs] are new, they've had a focus on physical healthcare, and some of them cover very large areas," he said.

But, he added, "the smart ones will be up to it".

"Theoretically, in terms of world's best practice, it's a better system than individual fee for service, but that doesn't mean it will be done effectively in Australia or in every region."

So was this the government's take on the meaning of 'medical homes'?

"In the mental health review, we overtly talk about the medical homes," Professor Hickie said.

"How medical homes develop in the Australian environment is something we need to work out.

"Medical homes need to have a funding model that supports them you can't do that from existing individual Medicare payments.

"You have to take the same or similar amounts of funding and make it flexible."

Tags: [Mental Health \(/tags/mental-health/\)](/tags/mental-health/), [Chronic Disease \(/tags/chronic-disease/\)](/tags/chronic-disease/), [General Practice \(/tags/general-practice/\)](/tags/general-practice/)

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## Author: David Rowley



David has worked at *The Australian*, the (now defunct) *Daily Mirror* and Australian Association Press. He has written for *The Observer* (UK), *The Sydney Morning Herald* and been a correspondent for publications such as *Billboard* and *The Hollywood Reporter*.

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