

## More cash for mental health call

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THE federal government's top mental health expert has delivered his first major piece of advice to Prime Minister Julia Gillard: he wants a massive \$2.5 billion extra money earmarked in May's budget and a total overhaul in the way mental illness is treated in Australia. Catholic priest Monsignor David Cappo, who sits on the national advisory committee and ministerial expert group, is also calling for most of the funding for the popular Better Access program - under which nearly one in 20 Australians access Medicare-subsidised treatment for anxiety and depression - to shift to those with more chronic mental illness.

This comes as The Sunday Age can reveal the government's key commitment on youth mental illness - championed by former Australian of the year Patrick McGorry - is struggling. Chris Tanti, chief executive of the youth mental health service headspace, says there is only enough money to build 23 of the 30 new centres the government promised. Monsignor Cappo is working on a pre-budget mental health blueprint with Sydney professor Ian Hickie and Professor McGorry. They say Ms Gillard must commit to an extra \$2.5 billion over the four-year budget period - and \$3.5 billion over five - to deliver on her promise to make mental health a priority in Labor's second term.

The Commonwealth Health Department's budget for mental health programs is \$1.4 billion over four years. But the biggest drain on the budget's mental health funding is the Better Access program, which The Sunday Age revealed last week is likely to cost \$3 billion over the next budget period. The advisers believe the government can save \$1 billion by transforming the popular Medicare program.

"We know all the pressures on government, but that does not mean the government should walk away from its major commitment to mental health funding," said Monsignor Cappo. Professor Hickie told The Sunday Age: "All the policy signals are right, we are dressed up again, we've got on our best frocks, but there's a terrible anxiety in the sector that, again, we won't get asked to the ball."

This level of funding is also backed by one of the government's other mental health advisers, Professor Allan Fels. Last month, the Australian Medical Association called for an extra \$5 billion for mental health over four years. The experts' budget request covers a boost in early-intervention programs, better accountability and research in mental health, and \$1 billion for a new way to treat mental illness. Monsignor Cappo said the new approach was not only about doctors and psychiatrists but about getting the mentally ill connected to their community through jobs, education, training, housing and the justice system.

"This is a completely new model for Australia - it's one that people are crying out for," he said.

Professor McGorry told The Sunday Age that if there was no commitment by the Commonwealth in May, then the mid-year Council of Australian Governments meeting on mental health would be a farce. Mental Health Minister Mark Butler would not comment on the budget but said Ms Gillard, the Treasurer and the Finance Minister had described the "tightness of the budget environment this year". The Coalition said Ms Gillard should commit to major reform this budget.