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# Youth mental help claims soar

**CATHY O'LEARY**

WA's biggest health insurer says claims for psychiatric services by young people are rising markedly as more people turn to the private system for treatment.

HBF says the total number of claims for inpatient treatment in WA reached 48,780 last year, with \$607,014 paid out to people aged 17 to 24, compared with \$387,578 four years ago.

General manager of claims, Jennifer Solitario, said psychiatric treatment was now the biggest claims area for young singles, with an average claim of \$10,117.

"Middle singles" aged 25 to 44 without dependants claimed more than \$4.2 million in psychiatric benefits last year, or a quarter of the total psychiatric benefits paid by the insurer.

Psychiatrist Paul Skerritt, a former president of the Australian Medical Association, said the rise in claims, which were invariably

for hospital admissions, probably reflected a growing awareness of the need to treat serious mental illness. But they were also likely to be increasing because more young people were using health insurance to access private care, rather than rely on the overburdened public health system which could not cope with the number of people seeking help.

"In general there are always stresses in life so the actual incidence of psychiatric problems is not likely to be changing, but I work in the northern suburbs and I'm certainly seeing lots of youngsters coming through," Dr Skerritt said.

"I think people are more aware of these issues and it probably says something about the inadequate public system to treat psychiatric disorders.

"People are turning to health insurance to make sure they can get a bed."

Clare O'Brien, of Claremont, is one of the growing number of young people claiming psychiatric services. The 26-year-old upgraded her health policy when she spent a week in a private psychiatric unit being treated for depression a few years ago.

Now a teaching graduate and about to start work, she says depression was not uncommon among her friends.

"People still find it hard to put their hand up for help but a lot of my friends hitting their early 20s have been struggling with depression," she said.

"Some of them get through uni and then get a real job but don't know how to cope with the stresses of life."

HBF also reported a sharp increase in the number of claims for skin cancer treatments in WA, rising 41 per cent in two years.