



The Royal
Australian &
New Zealand
College of
Psychiatrists



Department of Social Services
Australian National Autism Strategy Draft
June 2024

Advocacy and collaboration to improve access and equity

About the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) is the peak body representing psychiatrists in Australia and New Zealand and is responsible for training, educating, and representing psychiatrists. The College has over 8400 members, including more than 5900 qualified psychiatrists. The RANZCP represents members practicing in both the public and private health systems, as well as across different aspects of academic and clinical research.

Key findings

The RANZCP recommends the Government ensure the National Autism Strategy (the Strategy):

- Includes the voices of Autistic people at all stages of its development and implementation to support a more inclusive approach to policy development and service design.
- Addresses issues of economic inclusion by outlining how costs of healthcare services will be reduced and employment programs improved.
- Addresses issues of social inclusion, namely in educational environments and through cultural safety.

Introduction

The RANZCP welcomes the development of the Strategy and the opportunity to contribute to its construction. The Strategy's goals of utilising available evidence, identifying gaps in existing research and care, and reducing the burden on the Autistic community is a commendable one. The RANZCP has previously highlighted its [Position Statement 110: Autism: Addressing the mental health needs of Autistic people](#).

Include Autistic Voices

The RANZCP commends the commitment to incorporating the voices and perspectives of Autistic people throughout the design, production, review, and delivery of the Strategy. By actively engaging those with lived experience, the Strategy is better equipped to address the diverse needs and challenges faced by the Autistic community and ensure that their voices are heard and valued. The inclusion of a clear timeline for the implementation plan is also a positive step towards improved accountability and progress tracking. A well-defined timeline facilitates effective execution and helps to ensure that the Strategy's objectives are met in a timely manner.

The development of a robust evaluation plan with reporting mechanisms co-led by the Autistic community will be essential to the success of the Strategy. Similar to how the National Autism Strategy Oversight Council oversees the development and implementation of the Strategy, the RANZCP urges a similarly focused and robust body be formed for the evaluation and reporting processes in collaboration with Autistic people. This will facilitate accountability and ensure that the Strategy's objectives are effectively met. Such an evaluation framework must be well informed and funded to ensure that the vision of the Strategy is realised and there is sustained improvement to the function of the Strategy in future.

The Strategy's emphasis on clarifying the roles of all levels of government is commendable. Similar clarity must be applied to funding models and the delineation of responsibilities among government bodies.

Specific allocation of resources and accountability mechanisms will ensure effective implementation and sustained support for the Strategy.

It is crucial to address current psychiatry workforce shortages to increase the accessibility of services for Autistic individuals. There are currently severe capacity limitations for psychiatrists in the public sector. There must be increased funding for psychiatric workforce development to attract and retain qualified professionals and mitigate barriers to care.

Economic Inclusion

The Medicare Benefits Scheme (MBS) is a crucial pathway to improve access to care in line with the Strategy's key values. Rebates for psychiatric consultations should be increased from 85% to 100% under the MBS to enhance affordability and accessibility of services for Autistic individuals, particularly diagnoses and support.[1]

Current workforce shortages in the public health system cause many clients to seek private health services – a significant financial barrier for many autistic people. Increased rebates would directly mitigate this. Greater specificity for initiatives aimed at reducing the financial burden for seeking mental healthcare services such as subsidies, rebates, or alternative funding mechanisms would support equitable access to essential mental health support.

The expansion of autism-specific employment programs and the commitment to increasing meaningful employment opportunities for Autistic individuals is a crucial step to promote economic participation.[2] The Strategy should explicitly recognise the Disability Employment Service System as the primary mechanism for expanding autism-specific employment programs.

Social Inclusion

The Strategy outlines clear intentions to improve classroom practices and promote inclusion of students across education settings. Specific measures should be taken to integrate Autistic children into neurotypical classrooms, especially where there are no/minimal comorbidities of intellectual disability. More than one third of Australian parents have had their Autistic child either discouraged or refused entry to schools, with half of those experiencing this within the public school system.[3] Rates of social isolation are significantly higher for Autistic children which, when compounded with the existing prevalence of stigma, can severely impact equitable mental health for young children.[4]

Strategies such as teacher training in neurodiversity, sensory-friendly classroom environments, and peer support programs can foster inclusivity and support the diverse learning needs of Autistic students.[5] Such practice is well evidenced to improve social responsiveness, enhance language reception skills and lead to more complex coordinated play.[4]

The Strategy should specifically address early childhood interventions. Children are more likely to mask deficiencies at a younger age when feeling at a deficit to neurotypical peers. This may lead to underdiagnosis at crucial developmental stages for young Autistic children.[6]

The Strategy's championing of strength-based and neurodiversity-affirming approaches is welcome and has the potential to have significant positive impact on social inclusion for Autistic people in educational environments. Such approaches should be extended when considering culturally and language diverse Autistic people. The intersectional approach highlighted in the Strategy indicates commitment to improving the cultural safety of existing services and recognising the diversity of cultural experiences of Autistic

people. Recognising the unique challenges faced by Autistic individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds is essential in developing effective and inclusive support systems.

Consultation with First Nation peoples to ensure cultural safety and relevance in the design and implementation of the strategy is paramount. Their insights and perspectives are essential in addressing the diverse cultural experiences and needs of autistic individuals within Indigenous communities.[7]

Further Information

The RANZCP thanks the DSS for the opportunity to provide this submission and welcomes the opportunity for further engagement in the development of the Strategy. If you have any questions or wish to discuss any details, please contact Nicola Wright, Executive Manager, Policy, Practice and Research via nicola.wright@ranzcp.org or on (03) 9236 9103.

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