

Department of Health and Aged Care
**Consultation on the draft National Roadmap to Improve the Health and Mental
Health of Autistic People**

September 2024

Reducing barriers to access

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists submission

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About the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) is a membership organisation that is responsible for training, educating and representing psychiatrists in Australia and New Zealand. The RANZCP has more than 8500 members, including around 5800 qualified psychiatrists.

Introduction

The RANZCP welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Health and Aged Care's (DoHAC) draft National draft to Improve the Health and Mental Health of Autistic People. The RANZCP partners with people with lived experience of mental illness (also referred to as consumers) and carers, through our Community Collaboration Committee (CCC). The recommendations contained within this submission are informed by consultations with RANZCP committees, including the Faculty of Adult Psychiatry, Faculty of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Section of Psychiatry of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. These committees consist of psychiatrists with extensive experience in supporting the autistic community, positioning the RANZCP to offer valuable insights based on a wealth of academic, clinical and service delivery expertise.

The recommendations contained within this document are based on previous submissions and key RANZCP documents, including:

- [RANZCP Position Statement 62: Partnering with People with Lived Experience](#)
- [RANZCP Position Statement 110: Autism: Addressing the mental health needs of Autistic people](#)
- [RANZCP submission to the NDIS Review](#)
- [RANZCP submission to the National Autism Strategy](#)
- [RANZCP submission to the draft National Autism Strategy](#)

Recommendations

The draft National Roadmap to Improve the Health and Mental Health of Autistic People (the Roadmap) outlines key concepts, focus areas and guiding principles for enhancing access to mental and physical healthcare for autistic people. The RANZCP recommends:

- The establishment of a specific Medicare benefit item for multidisciplinary case conferences and a psychiatry report writing is essential to enhance collaboration among health professionals.
- Introduce new funding streams to establish new psychiatry trainee placements in private practice settings to address the impact of workforce shortages.
- Improve the cultural safety of existing and emerging services and supports by adopting an intersectional approach.
- The final Roadmap and its implementation should feature clearer timelines, deadlines, and measurable outcomes to ensure accountability.
- Increased funding and collaboration are needed to better understand the needs of autistic people through focused research.
- The final Roadmap should explicitly recognise the Disability Employment Service System as the primary mechanism for expanding autism-specific employment programs.

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The Roadmap

There is a need for a national Roadmap to inform and guide mental and physical health policy for autistic people. The RANZCP supports several key considerations outlined in the draft Roadmap:

- a biopsychosocial model of disability is key to understanding the experiences of autistic people
- the importance of information pertaining to physical and mental health, and experiences of suicide amongst autistic people
- acknowledging barriers to accessing health services for autistic people
- the intersectionality of priority populations and autism.

The guiding principles of the Roadmap are critical for shaping effective policies and strategies to support autistic communities.

Focus areas

- Focus Area A – Improving support for autistic people, their families and carers, in health and mental health services.

The RANZCP supports the draft Roadmap's commitment to improving support for autistic people within the health and mental health care landscape. Increasing access to primary care is vital for achieving better outcomes and the RANZCP endorses the draft Roadmap's innovative funding models aimed at facilitating this. Specifically, the RANZCP advocates for raising the Medicare Benefits Scheme (MBS) rebates for psychiatry items from 85% to 100%. This adjustment would make mental health services more affordable and accessible, particularly for individuals seeking diagnoses and support.[1]

Current workforce shortages in the public health sector compel many clients to seek private health services, creating financial barriers that increased rebates could alleviate. Additional measures, such as subsidies, rebates, or alternative funding mechanisms are essential to enhance equitable access to essential mental health support.

In the [RANZCP 2024/2025 prebudget submission](#), the RANZCP called to increase specialist training program funding for additional training placements in private practice settings. With current workforce shortages severely affecting public hospital and community mental health services, additional capacity in the private sector can provide gap coverage and ease the burden on the current workforce supporting autistic communities.

The RANZCP asserts that in order to ensure greater financial autonomy for autistic communities, it is important to expand specific employment programmes which promote economic inclusion. There is great potential benefit for individual's wellbeing by reducing financial barriers to care seeking by including these programs in available services.[2] In line with previous RANZCP recommendations, the final Roadmap should explicitly recognise the Disability Employment Service System as the primary avenue for expanding autism-specific employment programs.

The RANZCP endorses the Roadmap's commitment to providing co-designed spaces in health facilities that support autistic people. It is of particular importance to improve health settings for children and adolescents in ways that foster inclusivity. Staff training in neurodiversity, the creation of sensory-friendly healthcare environments, and the development of peer support programs for those frequenting health services are paramount.[3] Evidence suggests that these practices enhance social responsiveness, language comprehension and overall health outcomes.[4]

- Focus Area B – Improving the quality, safety and availability of autism affirming health and mental health care across their lifespan.

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The Roadmap's commitment to improving services for people with autism across their lifespan is critical. To effectively enhance autism affirming health and mental health care, early childhood interventions must be prioritised. Risks of masking in early years can lead to underdiagnosis, particularly among females, who are diagnosed at a rate of 1:4 compared to males. Addressing this requires a commitment to early and accurate identification and intervention.[5, 6] Current limitations in accessing psychiatric support within the public sector hinder timely and effective support for autistic children. To address this gap, increased funding is required to expand the psychiatric workforce and attract professionals trained in the unique and intersecting of autistic children.

The emphasis on strength-based and Autism Affirming approaches has significant potential to foster social inclusion for autistic peoples in health services. It is crucial that these approaches also address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse autistic peoples, acknowledging the intersection of their unique experiences and challenges.

- Focus Area C – Building better connections between health, mental health, and other service sectors, including the NDIS

The Roadmap's emphasis on clarifying the roles of all levels of government is significant. This clarity must extend to funding models and the delineation of responsibilities amongst government bodies. Allocating specific resources and establishing accountability mechanisms will ensure effective implementation of the final Roadmap. Workforce shortages in psychiatry must be addressed to improve the accessibility of services for autistic peoples.

The RANZCP strongly supports the Roadmap's commitment to improving the accessibility of mental health services for autistic people under the NDIS. Cohesion among existing care models is vital, as support requirements vary based on individual circumstances, condition severity and comorbidities. This makes the process of assessment crucial to ensuring maximum beneficence for autistic people from the NDIS.

Collaborative efforts among coordinators, healthcare professionals, carers and clients are essential for providing holistic support. More information can be found in our recent [NDIS review submission](#). The RANZCP supports the use of Multidisciplinary Case Conferences (MDCCs) that include NDIS workers in the design and communication of treatment plans. These MDCCs should be funded under Medicare, with the creation of a designated item number to incentivise collaboration among health professionals. Such integration will facilitate better patient outcomes and provide clarity for the ongoing care of autistic peoples.

The introduction of a bulk-billed MBS item to remunerate clients and clinicians for the process of report writing for autism diagnoses would reduce financial barriers to accessing the NDIS, improving early intervention opportunities.[7]

- Focus Area D: Improving autism education and training for health and disability professionals.

The RANZCP commends the Roadmap's focus on improving education and training for professionals supporting autistic communities. A deeper understanding of Autism Affirming services can reduce barriers to access and enhance patient outcomes.[8-11] Psychiatrists are critical to facilitating access to mental healthcare for autistic people, often addressing the everyday challenges they face. The draft Roadmap's effectiveness and ensure clarity in its objectives will be supported by implementing tangible evaluation frameworks to measure the impact of educational initiatives.

It is vital to incorporate co-design principles and insights from those with lived experience develop equitable, choice-focused services.[12] This insight plays a critical role in reducing misunderstanding and stigma towards autistic people experiencing a mental health condition in the community and improving

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community attitudes. An improved understanding of autism in clinicians working in mainstream services would enhance experiences and outcomes for people who are or may be autistic, particularly as referrals via mainstream services are a common pathway to adult diagnosis.[13,14]

- Focus Area E: Strengthening research and data on the health and mental health of Autistic people and their families and carers.

It is essential to improve research and data collection to build effective services and policies for autistic people. A model that partners policy makers and communities with lived experience, as outlined in the [RANZCP position statement](#), will help to support the development and implementation of the draft Roadmap. Research that improves the understanding of the complex health needs of autistic people is lacking.[15-17] Consistent data on consumer demographics, rates of comorbid conditions, and service access are required to improve interventions, subsequently providing better health outcomes. Collecting data on the lived experiences of autistic peoples within the healthcare systems can inform necessary improvements. Future research should prioritise co-design and co-delivery methodologies.[16, 18]

- Focus Area F: Arrangements for oversight, monitoring, and implementation of the Autism Health draft Roadmap

Effective governance and monitoring are crucial for the successful implementation of policies and initiatives supporting autistic communities. The RANZCP recommends establishing an oversight body akin to the National Autism Strategy Oversight Council, ensuring representation from psychiatry and co-designing its framework with autistic people.

The RANZCP [Position Statement 110: Autism: Addressing the mental health needs of Autistic people](#) highlights that the role of the psychiatrist in supporting autistic people is to enable the delivery of the highest quality of care, in partnership with the family, whānau, carers and other service providers. The impact of the draft Roadmap will be underpinned by clear implementation timeframes and a robust *Outcomes, Monitoring and Evaluation Framework*.

The RANZCP is eager to provide further expert advice and feedback on the and implementation of the draft Roadmap. To discuss any of the comments raised in this submission, please contact Nicola Wright, Executive Manager, Policy, Practice, and Research Department via Nicola.wright@ranzcp.org or on (03) 0236 9103.

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