

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to share my personal perspective on the National Autism Strategy Discussion Paper, as an Australian woman living with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who received my diagnosis at the age of 21. These experiences have profoundly influenced my viewpoint on this critical issue.

I want to commend the initiative to address the needs of individuals on the autism spectrum through a comprehensive national strategy. This effort is long overdue, and I deeply appreciate the steps taken to bring about positive change in the lives of people like myself, as well as my 3-year-old son, who also has ASD.

However, I wish to draw attention to a significant gap in the current support framework, particularly concerning the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). I've encountered challenges in educating Local Area Coordinators (LACs) about the unique requirements of individuals with ASD. One common misconception is the mischaracterisation of ASD as a mental health issue. It is crucial to acknowledge that ASD is not covered under a mental health care plan, and tailored psychological support specific to ASD is vital.

Moreover, conveying how ASD profoundly impacts daily functioning has been a challenge. This extends beyond social interactions; it encompasses sensory sensitivities, communication nuances, and intricate behavioural patterns. There are times when completing everyday tasks becomes a struggle due to ASD, and it is important to understand that this is not a matter of laziness. It is imperative for LACs to undergo comprehensive training to gain a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences within the ASD community.

Based on my personal journey, I implore the governing bodies to consider the following recommendations:

1. Implement rigorous training programs for LACs to deepen their understanding of ASD and its multifaceted impact on daily life.
2. Ensure that NDIS plans explicitly acknowledge the necessity of ASD-specific psychology services, distinct from mental health provisions.
3. Foster greater collaboration between NDIS, healthcare professionals, and community organisations to streamline the provision of tailored support for individuals with ASD.

In addition, I strongly urge the inclusion of robust support systems for carers, recognising that ASD often has a multi-generational impact due to its hereditary nature. Carers themselves often have ASD, and as such, tailored resources and respite care are essential components of a holistic support framework.

Moreover, it's crucial to acknowledge the socioeconomic challenges faced by many individuals with ASD. Research consistently highlights that a significant portion of the ASD community falls within the lowest socioeconomic class. This places them at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing crucial resources and support systems.

Addressing these disparities is imperative for achieving true inclusivity and ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their economic circumstances, have equal access to the support they need. By implementing targeted measures to uplift those in lower socioeconomic brackets, we can create a more equitable and supportive environment for everyone in the ASD community.

Furthermore, it is essential to recognise that ASD often co-occurs with other conditions, such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), among others. These comorbidities significantly impact the lives of individuals with ASD, adding layers of complexity to their experiences.

While addressing ASD is crucial, it is equally imperative to comprehensively address these comorbidities. This involves ensuring access to specialised care and support that caters to the unique needs of individuals dealing with multiple conditions. A holistic approach that acknowledges and accommodates these comorbidities is essential in providing effective and inclusive care.

In addition to ADHD, there are various other comorbidities that individuals with ASD may contend with, ranging from anxiety and depression to sensory processing disorders. Each of these conditions brings its own set of challenges and necessitates tailored interventions. It is imperative that the National Autism Strategy encompasses a framework that not only acknowledges these comorbidities but also outlines clear pathways for their diagnosis, treatment, and ongoing management.

By addressing comorbidities within the broader context of the National Autism Strategy, we can create a support system that recognises and accommodates the diverse needs of individuals with ASD, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and empowering environment for all.

Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge that ADHD often lacks the recognition and support it deserves, particularly within the context of the NDIS. Yet, its impact can be profoundly significant and is experienced by a substantial portion of the population.

Obtaining a diagnosis for ADHD presents its own set of challenges. The extended waiting times for assessments and the associated costs of consultations with psychiatrists can be formidable barriers for many. This results in delayed access to essential interventions and support systems, exacerbating the difficulties faced by individuals dealing with ADHD.

Addressing these issues and affording proper recognition to the prevalence and impact of ADHD is crucial in creating a more inclusive and responsive support framework within the National Autism Strategy.

Lastly, as someone who experiences ASD, navigating the NDIS can be quite challenging for me; especially during planning meetings. I know I am entitled to the support, but convincing the LACs of that can be difficult. I worry throughout the year about potential cuts to my funding. Changes need to be made here to make it more participant-friendly while maintaining fairness.

Finally, I emphasise the importance of eradicating the stigma surrounding ASD. Raising public awareness and fostering acceptance will create a more inclusive society, allowing individuals with ASD to thrive on their own terms.

I believe that if these measures are implemented, they will significantly enhance the support system for those on the autism spectrum and their families, aligning with the overarching goal of the National Autism Strategy.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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