



The Hon Mark Butler MP
Minister for Mental Health and Ageing
PO Box 2038
Port Adelaide SA 5015

Dear the Hon Mark Butler MP,

I write to ask you to adopt *Including, Connecting, Contributing: A Blueprint to Transform Mental Health and Social Participation in Australia*.

Autism Aspergers Advocacy Australia (A4) sees *Including, Connecting, Contributing* as essential for the health of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) as this “blueprint” recognises the role and relevance of services in the mental health sector for people with ASD.

Australia needs appropriate mental health services. *Including, Connecting, Contributing* is the most credible mental health plan that we are aware of.

We are concerned that Government officials in the health sector advise that “autism is not a mental illness” and argue that people with ASD should not receive mental health services. A4 rejects their view. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, 4th edition* (1994), the primary reference, is clear that Pervasive Developmental Disorders, including ASD, lie clearly in the domain of mental illness. We ask what standard/reference are government officials using to claim “autism is not a mental illness”? If they think it is not a mental illness then where in the body, according to these officials, do Autism Spectrum Disorders manifest (is it the foot, the kidney or some other part of the body)? Which part of the health system should people with ASD go to get appropriate clinical services? If these officials persist in their view that Governments should deny people with autism access to mental health services, when will these officials ensure treatment for ASD-related anxiety, ASD-related depression, ASD-related psychosis, etc. is available outside the mental health sector ... or is it their plan that the health sector will continue to deny many of Australians most vulnerable citizens any treatment for all such disorders?

A4 is especially concerned that Government gets advice about ASD from health professionals and administrators whose entire career involved **not treating** autism spectrum disorders. Government should be wary of advice from people who offer “professional” opinions about treatment and services for people with ASD based on inexperience with ASD, outdated & inadequate information, false assumption and prejudice.

In contrast, the Independent Mental Health Reform Group, authors of *Including, Connecting, Contributing*, include and recognise the significance of ASD which makes their blueprint the most credible policy documents for mental health that we have seen.

In relation to ASD, please be aware that:

- Several reliable data sources show that 1% of Australian children are now diagnosed formally with ASD (and recent publicity is out of date with the rapid growth in numbers);
- ASD diagnosis rates for Australian children more than doubled every 5 years over the last 20 years ... the growing rate of ASD diagnosis should be a major concern for Governments.
- Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003 Survey of Disability Ageing and Carers show that even after diagnosis rates doubled, 87% of people with ASD have severe or profound disability so the increase is not primarily due to milder cases of ASD (as many Government officials claim wrongly) ... thereby confirming diagnoses of ASD are for severe and pervasive impairment as the diagnostic criteria demand.
- The AIHW estimated that in 2003, autism was 2nd highest “burden of disease and injury” for boys (Note, there has been substantial growth in the number of diagnoses since 2003 so the estimated burden should have increased).
- Clinical services for people with ASD in Australia are not keeping pace with growth in demand.
- Specialist/generic health and disability services in Australia are not well suited to people with ASD.

The *Including, Connecting, Contributing* blueprint is the best available plan to address the health sector needs of people with ASD. Please ensure it is funded in the coming budget. Please address the health needs, especially the mental health needs, of Australians with autism spectrum disorders.

Yours sincerely,

R. Buckley
Convenor

11/4/2011