



**THE HON MARK BUTLER MP
MINISTER FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND AGEING**

Mr Bob Buckley
Convenor
Autism Aspergers Advocacy Australia
c/- SHOUT
PO Box 717
MAWSON ACT 2607

Dear Mr Buckley

I refer to your letter of 28 August 2011 to the Prime Minister, the Hon Julia Gillard MP, regarding your concerns about a response prepared by the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) to the Senate Community Affairs Committee. Your letter has been referred to me as the Minister for Mental Health and Ageing.

Your letter raised two concerns in relation to DoHA's response to the Senate Community Affairs Committee Question on Notice E11-184. Your first concern related to the statement that autism is the remit of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).

When government programs involve cross portfolio issues it is not uncommon to identify a lead agency to ensure appropriate coordination. As FaHCSIA has policy responsibility for services for people with disabilities, it is consequently the lead agency for the Helping Children with Autism (HCWA) package. I understand that it is for this reason that DoHA's response described autism as being the remit of FaHCSIA.

However, although FaHCSIA has policy responsibility, I acknowledge that the Australian Government's response to autism must be a shared responsibility. HCWA is a cross portfolio package, including components overseen by three Departments – FaHCSIA, DoHA and the Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations. DoHA has responsibility for the implementation of a component of the package, the new Medicare items for diagnosis and early intervention for children with autism and other pervasive developmental disorders.

Your second concern related to the statement that DoHA is not aware of any evidence of any major shifts in the prevalence of autism in Australia.

I understand that DoHA does not collect data on the prevalence of autism in Australia. However, DoHA's answer focused on prevalence rather than on broader information about autism.

The Australian Government, through the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), has funded nearly \$20 million over the last ten years on research into autism and related disorders. While some research suggests an increase in the number of autism diagnoses, I have been advised that many international experts have urged caution in interpreting this data.

The Government is aware of the need for accurate data on autism and is developing a register to improve our understanding. In August 2009 the then Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children's Services announced support for a National Autism Spectrum Disorder Register to create a comprehensive approach to the collection of data on autism.

The National Autism Spectrum Disorder Register followed from a recommendation of a 2007 report titled *The Prevalence of Autism in Australia*, commissioned by the Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders.

The report found that the prevalence of autism in Australia was not certain from existing data. It recommended that additional sources of information, such as a register of individuals with autism, would be required to gather reliable and valid estimates of the prevalence of autism.

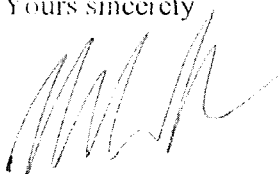
FaHSCIA has responsibility for the National Autism Spectrum Register. I have been advised that FaHSCIA has undertaken a number of projects with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to explore the feasibility and propose options for development of the Register and these options are currently under consideration.

I have been advised that DoHA has prepared a response to the Senate Committee in relation to your correspondence to the Committee on this issue. DoHA has advised the Committee that it is happy for the response to be made public.

I understand you have met with Minister Roxon's office and should you wish to discuss these matters further, feel free to get in touch with my advisor, Mr David Pearson, on (02) 6277 7280.

I trust that the above information is of use.

Yours sincerely



MARK BUTLER

03 NOV 2011