



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

Deputy Secretary

Mr Bob Buckley
Convenor
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Dear Mr Buckley

Thank you for your email of 6 April 2016 to Mr Finn Pratt, Secretary of the Department of Social Services, about the diagnosis rates of Autism in Australia. The Secretary has asked me to reply on his behalf.

As you are aware, diagnosis rates for Autism have increased dramatically in the past 30 years. However, the Department does not have evidence to suggest this is due to over-diagnosis. It is plausible that increased diagnosis rates stem from a greater understanding of Autism, as well as the development of improved diagnostic tools leading to earlier diagnosis.

The Department supports the work of the CRC for Living with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Autism CRC) and has provided funding for several projects which aim to further our knowledge and understanding of Autism. This includes a two-part project into diagnostic practices in Australia. The first part of this project investigates current diagnostic practices, while the second part of this project will assess potential variation in Autism diagnoses across Australia.

In referring to this project, the Australian National Audit Office refers to 'establishing the extent of over-diagnosis' in their audit report *Early Intervention Services for Children with Disability*. However, this wording is not intended to presuppose the findings of the Autism CRC project. As noted above, the Department does not have evidence to suggest that Autism is being over-diagnosed.

The first part of the Autism CRC project, entitled *Autism Spectrum Disorder Diagnosis in Australia*, will soon be publicly available. This report does provide a partial answer to your questions. According to the report, 17 per cent of diagnosticians surveyed have, on at least one occasion, diagnosed Autism when the person did not meet the full criteria. However, 88 per cent of this group indicated that they had given the diagnosis because they thought the individual did have Autism and the assessment did not represent the individual's usual presentation. This finding suggests that the Helping Children with Autism programme (HCWA) is not the driving force behind increased diagnosis rates.

As you know, in the longer term the Government is committed to the full rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Once the NDIS is in place, all Australians with disability will be able to access necessary supports based on their functional need rather than on a specific diagnosis.

We will know more about this issue once the second part of the Autism CRC project is completed in late 2016. The Department shares your interest in ensuring early and accurate diagnosis so that funding for early intervention is available to families who need it most.

Yours sincerely



Barbara Bennett

14 April 2016