



Autism Aspergers Advocacy Australia

MEDIA RELEASE

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AUTISM GROUP (A4) EXPRESSES CONCERNS OVER ANU AUTISM STUDY

The CEO of A4, a recognised Disability Representative Organisation for autism, has described an ANU researcher's comments regarding the 'prevalence of autism' as flawed.

The article says:

Australian estimates of prevalence in children are the highest in the world and have grown faster than the global average. Incentives in government policy, specifically the NDIS, is the key factor unique to the Australian context and potentially explains the additional growth in Australian prevalence.

Bob Buckley, A4's co-convenor, says:

- the figures used are reported diagnosis rates which at best are very rough approximations of "prevalence".
- only the least reliable measures of diagnosis rates rank as "the highest in the world" or might suggest growth "faster than the global average". Note that about half the data meets this second criterion.
- the article does not provide credible evidence that "government policy, specifically the NDIS, ... potentially explains the additional growth in Australian [diagnosis rates]"

"At the outset it's wrong to talk about autism prevalence, when we only have diagnosis rates that [vary substantially with age](#). For example there is a growing number of Australian adults getting an autism diagnosis, yet many of these people are not seeking access to the services and supports from the NDIS," said CEO of A4, Bob Buckley.

He said, "the NDIS is not a financial incentive since little or no money goes to NDIS participants or their families; mostly, the NDIS pays directly for services rather than providing cash."

"Autism would be a bad choice for a scammer. It is much easier to get a child into the NDIS with a 'developmental delay' label. NDIS eligibility for autism may require further assessment.

"The average NDIS plan commitment is \$75K per year, but the average autism participant is only funded for \$33,800 a year of services. Sensible people only pursue an autism diagnosis if they need specific autism service and supports," said Buckley.



Mr Buckley said that academics often reach simpler and incomplete conclusions in examining complex issues. This research does not appear to properly compare findings or weigh the reliability of different data.

“It is unclear where some of the Australian data comes from, but the 2015 and 2018 data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, are considered by many to be relatively reliable and are right in the middle of the USA data in the graph. The Australian autism diagnosis rate for 8-year-olds is similar to the US data. As in the USA, autism diagnosis rates vary substantially between Australian states so the average is not really representative,” said Buckley (who is also a data analyst).

He said that using NDIS autism figures in this way is inappropriate since only some autistic people are eligible for the NDIS.

As Minister Shorten said (on ABC AM 14/11), no one at the NDIS expected the number of autistic NDIS participants; in other words, the NDIS and its actuaries have been consistently wrong in their predictions of autism numbers - they’ve been wrong by as much as a factor of four.

“Previously, claims about PM John Howard’s 2007 *Helping Children with Autism* program escalating autism diagnosis rates were also exaggerated,” said Buckley.

Buckley said that this study’s author had not included the [previous work](#) on autism numbers in Australia.

He said that in [communications with A4](#), the CEO of the NDIS had previously distanced itself from the author’s adverse commentary on autism and the NDIS.

Data from the NDIS shows young children (aged 0 to 6 years) with autism decreased from 35.6% to 19.9% of NDIS participants in that age group from 2019 to June 2023.

“This entire study might have held more credibility if the author had addressed autism diagnosis rates rather than *prevalence*,” Buckley concluded.

More information on the subject is available at <https://a4.org.au/node/2572>

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