



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

Senator Claire Moore
Chair
Community Affairs Legislation Committee
Community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator Moore

Thank you for the invitation to respond to correspondence from Mr Bob Buckley dated 29 August 2011. In his email and attached letter, Mr Buckley raised two concerns regarding the Department of Health and Ageing's (DoHA's) answer to Question on Notice E11-184 on autism prevalence.

Mr Buckley's first concern relates to the statement in the Department's answer that, as autism is generally considered to be as a pervasive developmental disability, that autism is the "remit of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA)".

As you will be aware, 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. For this reason the Department described autism as being the remit of FaHCSIA.

However, although FaHCSIA has policy responsibility, the Government's response to autism must be a shared responsibility that involves a number of portfolios, including health. As such the Department agrees with Mr Buckley's sentiment and confirms that HCWA is a cross portfolio package, including components overseen by three departments – FaHCSIA, DoHA and the Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations. The Medicare items for the HCWA package was mentioned as part of the Department's answer.

As Mr Buckley has noted in his letter to the Prime Minister dated 28 August 2011, the Department 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.

Mr Buckley's second concern relates to the statement that the Department is not aware of any evidence of any major shifts in the prevalence of autism in Australia.

The Department answered correctly in stating that it does not collect data on the prevalence of autism in Australia. However, our 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,

the Department understands that many international experts have urged caution in interpreting this data.

The Australian 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. The Department understands 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.

Thank you again for the opportunity to respond to this issue. I am happy for this response to be made public.

Yours sincerely



Georgie Harman
First Assistant Secretary
Mental Health and Drug Treatment Division

14 October 2011