

Australia's disability scheme prepares to restrict access for people with autism

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An incident last month revealed plans to prevent some forms of autism from being eligible for support under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). This underscores the cost-cutting agenda behind the NDIS, introduced by the last Labor government to privatise disability services.

A staff member from the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), the government agency running the NDIS, modified a list on the scheme's website of pre-qualifying conditions to automatically access the scheme on the NDIS website, removing autism level 2.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong developmental condition that affects an estimated 1 in 150 people in Australia. The symptoms can vary widely, from difficulty in communication and social interaction, to extreme obsessive interests and repetitive behaviours. As a result, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) separates ASD into three severity levels.

Level 3 is for people "requiring very substantial support." Level 2 requires "substantial support." Level 1, which was already not on the immediate approval list, is deemed to require "support."

A day after the change was posted, the original list was restored. In an attempt at damage control, Social Services Minister Dan Tehan sent a letter to advocacy organisations claiming that no changes would be made to the NDIA's operational guidelines, "unless those changes are informed by research, evidence and extensive consultation with stakeholders and the community."

Despite this token assurance, NDIA CEO Robert De Luca effectively confirmed that plans were underway to restrict access. At a budget estimates hearing last week, De Luca was asked for a guarantee that level 2 autism

would not be removed from the list. De Luca replied: "No, I cannot guarantee that."

There are serious concerns about what these changes will mean for the thousands of adults and children diagnosed with autism in Australia. Currently 29 percent of the participants in the NDIS, or 142,000 people, have autism—the same proportion as those diagnosed with an intellectual disability.

Autism Awareness Australia CEO Nicole Rogerson said she was shocked "but maybe not surprised." Rogerson said: "I think it's fairly obvious that the government is going to make changes to certain sections of children with autism and their eligibility under the NDIS, and you'd have to say the reason for that is cost cutting."

Despite Tehan's claims, Rogerson said her organisation had not been consulted regarding any possible change. "My fear is that it's a decision that's been made already," she said. Such a proposal would be "counterproductive" because research showed that early intervention meant a child with autism could lead happy, healthy and independent lives with minimal support.

The NDIS was launched in 2012 by the Gillard Labor government as a "once in a lifetime reform," fully supported by the Liberal-National opposition, the trade unions and the Greens. Since taking office in 2013, the Liberal-National government has continued the scheme.

The WSWs warned from the outset that the NDIS was designed to cut government funding, push people off the disability support pension (DSP) and dragoon them into the low-wage workforce. That has been confirmed on many fronts.

First came the shutting down of state-run residential facilities, forcibly transferring some severely disabled people into underfunded non-government group homes.

With the national rollout of the scheme in 2016, advocacy services and services for carers were reduced or extinguished, and caps imposed on the number of plans rolled out, potentially denying essential services to thousands of people.

Many families have said they are worse off under the scheme, citing long delays in vital assistive equipment, such as wheelchairs, hoists and basic ramps and handrails. A Tasmanian man, Tim Rubenach, died while waiting for a medical tilt bed, suffering bleeding stomach ulcers.

Families have also condemned the annual planning process, in which participants are reassessed by the NDIA and often have their funding reduced.

In April this year it was announced that the NDIS call centre, the main point of contact for inquiries, requests and complaints, would be outsourced to Serco, a company that runs private prisons and immigration detention centres, where asylum seekers are incarcerated indefinitely in shocking conditions.

NDIA deputy CEO Vicki Rundle pointed to the underlying agenda of the NDIS in a May 29 opinion piece for Fairfax Media. She addressed “some misconceptions around the underpinning of the NDIS,” insisting: “The NDIS is an insurance-based scheme. It is not welfare.”

Responding to reports of support plans being cut back, she said: “In an insurance-based scheme, as opposed to a welfare system, there should be no expectation that plans should not be reduced.”



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