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RACP Submission to the draft National Autism Strategy

May 2024

About The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP)

The RACP trains, educates and advocates on behalf of over 22,200 physicians and 9,800 trainee physicians, across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. The RACP represents a broad range of medical specialties across 33 specialty areas including paediatrics and child health, adolescent and young adult medicine, rehabilitation medicine, occupation and environmental medicine, and public health medicine. Beyond the drive for medical excellence, the RACP is committed to developing health and social policies which bring vital improvements to the wellbeing of patients, the medical profession and the community.



We acknowledge and pay respect to the Traditional Custodians and Elders – past, present and emerging – of the lands and waters on which RACP members and staff live, learn and work. The RACP acknowledges Māori as tangata whenua and Te Tiriti o Waitangi partners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) warmly welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft National Autism Strategy.

Key comments

The RACP welcomes the development of the National Autism Strategy to help advance outcomes of autistic people and initiate a more coordinated, national approach to supporting the autistic community across Australia. The RACP supports the strengths-based and neurodiversity-affirming approach taken in the draft National Autism Strategy.

The RACP emphasises and celebrates diversity and inclusiveness in relation to support for autistic individuals and families. Although autistic people may share many of the same characteristics, each autistic person is different – some will go through life with very little support, while others will need a lifetime of care and support.

Autism is a life-long condition and autistic people need supports within education, health, employment and social inclusion spaces, in addition to the National Disability Insurance Scheme. This needs a broad approach to ensure schools, workplaces and so on are adaptable and inclusive to autistic people. This may require changing our approaches and other norms in our society.

The RACP is committed to advocating for enhanced services, supports and life outcomes for autistic children, adolescents and adults. As an organisation that draws on the professional experience of physicians in a range of specialities, the RACP has concerns around existing levels of support and health care for autistic people across all ages and social groups in Australia. While recognising the contribution to diagnosis and treatment of practitioners from a range of healthcare professions, the RACP believes that physicians and psychologists with relevant training and experience are best placed to play a leading role in the coordination and integration of services and supports for autistic people.

The RACP recognises the importance of training of specialist paediatricians and physicians involved in the health and wellbeing of autistic people. We will continue to engage with the Department of Health and Aged Care on the development of the *National Roadmap to Improve the Health and Mental Health of Autistic People*, for which we are pleased to have a representative on the National Working Group.

Specific RACP feedback on the draft National Autism Strategy

The RACP wishes to re-emphasise the following key points outlined in our submission¹ to the National Autism Strategy discussion paper² in October 2023:

- The Strategy must have **measurable targets and outcomes** that focus on improving life outcomes for autistic people.
- Key elements of establishing an autism diagnosis should only be delivered by suitably **qualified, experienced and trained healthcare professionals**.
- Diagnosis and assessment of autism must be guided by a **multidisciplinary approach** that focuses on developmental and functional skills and ensures that appropriate support and intervention are provided to the person and their family, irrespective of the specific diagnosis.
- It is essential that services and supports for autistic people are based on **evidence-informed health care** which is person-centred, outcomes focused, supports

¹ RACP Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Autism https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/racp-submission-to-the-autism-select-committee.pdf?sfvrsn=75cdf41a_4

² Department of Social Services. What we have heard: moving towards development of a National Autism Strategy – Discussion paper. <https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/national-autism-strategydiscussionpaper2.pdf>

coordination across different providers and settings, and promotes new and innovative, integrated and multidisciplinary models of care.

- The **function of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)** should be explored to see how it can better support autistic people.
- Increased assistance should be given to the **families of First Nations autistic children** to access the NDIS and post-diagnostic support services that are culturally safe and appropriate.
- The Strategy should **prioritise improving access to mental health provision** that is appropriate to the needs of individuals diagnosed with autism.

In addition to this, our RACP members noted the need to monitor autistic people for early signs of mental health issues so that early interventions can be implemented before the impacts become too entrenched.

Our RACP members also noted that autistic children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds often require greater assistance to ensure timely access to appropriate care and supports, particularly when language acts as a barrier to effective communication.

RACP engagement

The RACP would welcome the opportunity to engage with the Department of Social Services and other stakeholders to deliver this work, particularly with respect to the following commitments aimed at improving the health care experience for autistic people, as well as their families and carers:

Commitment 12: Consider the use and consistency of current identification screening, outcome and diagnostic tools. Work with relevant professional bodies to develop a set of standardised co-designed training/professional development and resource materials to support professionals involved in the identification, assessment and diagnosis of autism to improve the experience, and quality of this process for autistic people and their families and carers.

Commitment 14: Explore ways to improve access to primary care, including through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS), to:

- a. improve quality health and mental health services for autistic people, with a focus on continuity of care, and
- b. explore ways to make Autism diagnosis and assessment processes more timely and accessible.

Commitment 15: Consider early screening and identification arrangements, and improved access to health professionals.

Closing remarks

The RACP commends the range of commitments within the draft National Autism Strategy, particularly those targeted at improving the social inclusion of autistic people and improving diagnosis and assessment services and supports. The RACP acknowledges that significant work will be required to action the commitments outlined.

We eagerly await the publication of the National Autism Strategy later this year. Should you require further information or wish to engage with the RACP and our experts, please contact the RACP Policy and Advocacy Team via policy@racp.edu.au.