

2020 CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT: NOVEMBER 2019 – NOVEMBER 2020

1. Introduction

2020 has been a year of unprecedented developments and a good deal of stress for the disability sector, especially with the changes brought about by COVID-19. This has had significant impact on people with Autism and their families. While no one could have anticipated COVID-19 and its disruption, many of our dedicated services across the country continued uninterrupted, but with adaptation.

In relation to our financial position, it has been a year in keeping with our prediction. However, as was reported last year, it is clear if we wish to expand the work of the Australian Advisory Board on Autism further, we will need to improve our financial position. This will be taken up by the Board in the coming year.

2. The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

2020 was a landmark year for the National Disability Insurance Scheme, representing seven years after the launch of the Scheme. Many positive changes have occurred during this time including greater access to services, individual control and choice; self-direction; and support for people to lead the life they choose. However, there are some concerns with a significant group of people with Autism not having access to the support they require because of NDIS misinterpretation of diagnostic information. The Australian Advisory Board on Autism has advocated strongly for this issue to be addressed by NDIA and will continue to do so.

We collaborated with NDIS on other matters this year through a number of channels including the NDIA's Autism Advisory Group. The Australian Advisory Board on Autism service providers have broad national connections and links to over 50,000 people with Autism, their families and related stakeholders. This has allowed feedback to government and NDIA on a range of important issues, including:

- i) Eligibility of children waiting for access to the NDIA;
- ii) Waiting times across Australia through ECEI Partners;
- iii) Independent Assessment Issues;
- iv) Complex Pathways;
- v) Mental Health and Autism;
- vi) Training for NDIA Planners and Partners;
- vii) The ongoing need for Autism Advisors to support families; and
- viii) The importance of access to diagnostic assessment.

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In our work on the NDIS Autism Advisory Group, we have consistently advocated for reforms that enhance the lives of people with Autism and strengthen the sector's capacity to provide the support they require.

3. COVID-19

While the infection rate of COVID-19 still rises exponentially around the globe, individuals with Autism are being identified as part of a group facing many challenges. Thankfully the situation in Australia has been well managed. Even so, with professional and social support reduced because of the pandemic, parents and caregivers encountered an increased frequency and severity of difficulties. There were also additional personal challenges for families, including working from home or loss of employment, with many overwhelmed by the significant additional demands on them.

Many of our organisations responded in remarkable ways to the challenges of the pandemic. From supporting families to re-developing disaster-recovery plans, tracking down and securing scarce PPE, maintaining essential services, training staff for the COVID environment, ensuring service-viability and, most importantly, keeping people safe. But despite the challenges of the last year, it has been very gratifying to see stakeholders stay connected as a community to our Mission to support people with Autism and their families.

4. The Asia Pacific Autism Conference (APAC)

The coming year was to be the year we held APAC21. Unfortunately, we have been unable to reschedule the Conference until we have a clearer picture of the trajectory of this pandemic and the impact of the vaccine.

5. The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse and Neglect of People with Disability

The Australian Advisory Board on Autism robustly supports the continued work of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse and Neglect of People with Disability. We fully support the potential of the Commission to break down any remaining vestiges of control that limits the human dignity and potential of people with Autism and, indeed, all people with disability.

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6. The Australian Autism Alliance

We were very pleased to continue our collaboration with the Autism Alliance this year, especially with the Senate Inquiry into Autism. We also supported the Alliance through financial support as well as administrative support.

The Alliance and the Australian Advisory Board on Autism will discuss key issues in the coming year regarding governance, strategic initiatives, stakeholder relationships and advocacy.

7. Conclusion

I would like to extend my thanks to all members of the Board for their continuing support of the work, especially in these very difficult and challenging times. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the outgoing Terry Burke who was Honorary Treasurer and Company Secretary, for six years (2014 – 2019) and was a Director of the Board for 7 years (came on to Board in 2013 - 2020).

Enormous thanks also to Pam Macrossan, CEO of Autism Queensland, for her work as Honorary Treasurer and Company Secretary; and also to the Deputy Chairperson Jenny Karavolos, CEO Autism South Australia; for her enormous contribution and work this year.

I think it especially important to note that all members of the Autism Advisory Board on Autism donate their time and do so because of their commitment to the field of Autism and to people with Autism and their families. This commitment involves time, travel, meetings and expense. All of the work undertaken by Directors is additional to their demanding roles in their respective organisations and universities.

We look forward to the coming year and to continuing to work with others to advance the position of people with Autism in our community.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Joan McKenna Kerr'.

Joan McKenna Kerr
Chairperson
30th November 2020