



Submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the economic impacts of mental ill-health

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the economic impact of mental health issues in Australia.

Autism Aspergers Advocacy Australia, known as A4, is about autistic people and their associates so the comments below relate specifically to autistic Australians.

While a manual of mental disorders known as the DSM describes [the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder \(ASD\)](#), ASD itself is *not* mental illness.

[A recent review](#) (1/10/2019) said:

Co-occurring mental health conditions are more prevalent in the autism population than in the general population. Careful assessment of mental health is an essential component of care for all people on the autism spectrum and should be integrated into clinical practice.

We make the following brief points.

1. Autistic people have high rates of mental illness which is often untreated. Untreated mental illness has an economic cost.
2. Autism Spectrum Disorder is increasingly important economically because it is the biggest primary disability type in the NDIS and the number of diagnoses continues to increase substantially.

Relatively little is known about the economic cost of ASD in Australia. [One study](#) reported that having an autistic child reduces average annual household income by \$35K. The cost of autistic Australians with mental illness is unknown.

Autistic people with mental illness report difficulty accessing mental health services and supports. Many mental health services and clinicians are reluctant, or outright refuse, to treat autistic people. This appears to be due to mental health staff lacking training and understanding: they are reluctant to treat autistic people because autism resists treatment. But autistic people don't want/expect treatment for their autism, they want treatment for their comorbid mental illness ... the same as anyone else gets treatment for their mental illness.

A mental health service refusing to treat autistic people's mental illness is disability discrimination but Section 45 of the Commonwealth [Disability Discrimination Act 1992](#) protects, and possibly promoted, lawful disability discrimination like this.

[National disability data about autism](#) from 2015 shows 2.8% of children were autistic (diagnosed with ASD) but just 0.2% of adults which means there is substantial under-diagnosis of ASD for Australian adults. Under-diagnosis of autistic adults results in less effective mental health treatment for undiagnosed autistic adults with mental illness.

Australia needs a National Autism Strategy that includes ASD education across the mental health sector, improving ASD diagnosis and services for undiagnosed autistic adults and government recognition that ASD diagnoses are still increasing substantially.

Please feel free to contact A4 if you would like more information about ASD in Australia and if you want to discuss possible strategies to address the unmet service and supports needs of autistic Australians.

Yours sincerely _____

Bob Buckley
Convenor

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