

Alliance calls for equal access to assistive technology

A national aids, equipment and assistive technology program should be established to meet the needs of people with disability who are not eligible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme, says an alliance of organisations spanning the ageing and disability sectors.

In its submission to the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, *The Assistive Technology for All Alliance* (ATFA) – lodged last week - has called for people with disability over the age of 65 to have the same access to assistive technology as younger people who qualify for the NDIS.

Assistive technology can help people with disability perform a range of everyday tasks safely and independently. It can take the form of specialised computer software, mobility aids such as wheelchairs, electronic communication devices and prosthetic aids but the list is wide and varied. These devices facilitate independence and participation in everyday life.

The NDIS is able to meet the cost of assistive technology for eligible people with disability who are under 65. People who are over 65 are not eligible for the NDIS.

‘We are increasingly concerned about the level of unmet need that exists for older people with disability who are not eligible for the NDIS,’ said ATFA coordinator Lauren Henley.

‘People over 65 who need assistive technology must be catered for within the aged care system. This system lacks specialist disability expertise and funding for assistive technology is limited.’

Key issues can be summarised as follows:

- Information about how to access funding for assistive technology outside the NDIS is limited, causing widespread confusion.
- There are no skilled assessment and review processes for assistive technology within the aged care system.
- Many older people with disability face waiting lists of up to two years to access funding for assistive technology. In the meantime, they are forced to self-fund the equipment they need or to go without.
- People in residential aged care cannot access funding for assistive technology.

In September, a delegation to the United Nations representing disability advocacy groups raised the issue as part of the review of Australia’s performance under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The International Committee that monitors Australia’s compliance with the convention recommended the Australian Government ensure older people with disability have equitable access to disability-related supports. Ensuring older people with disability have timely access to assistive technology will go a long way towards ensuring Australia is meeting its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

ATFA encourages other organisations and individuals who are concerned about access to assistive technology for older people with disability to consider making a submission to the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety.

About the *ATFA Alliance*

Assistive Technology for All is a national alliance of organisations and consumer representatives spanning the ageing and disability sectors. Supporting organisations who have endorsed ATFA's submission to the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety include:

Council on the Ageing Australia, Australian Association of Gerontology, Every Australian Counts, National Disability and Carer Alliance, The Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, People with Disability Australia, Australian Rehabilitation and Assistive Technology Association, Occupational Therapy Australia, Assistive Technology Suppliers Australia, TAD Australia, Blind Citizens Australia, , Leukodystrophy Australia, LifeTec, Limbs 4 Life Australia, MS Australia, Polio Australia, Spinal Cord Injuries Australia, Vision Australia, Bayside Polio Group, Council on the Ageing Victoria, Huntington's NSW ACT, Independent Living Centre WA, MND Victoria, Parkinson's Victoria, Post Polio Victoria

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See over for case studies

Case study: two people living with an above knee amputation – differences between state-based Artificial Limb Scheme Funding and the NDIS support

Robert and Steve underwent above-knee amputations due to aggressive infections. As Robert, 67, is only eligible for his state-based Artificial Limb Scheme, he does not have appropriate access to supports, assistive technology or home modifications. Steve, 56, has an NDIS Plan and can access an array of reasonable and necessary funded supports.

Robert, 67

Robert uses a mechanical knee unit that is not safe and consequently he falls often. His prosthetic foot does not provide energy return and leads to fatigue. Robert cannot choose the type of prosthesis he receives. If he falls or feels fatigued, he uses an old wheelchair, which is heavy and hard for him to push around. The impact of the regular falls has meant that Robert has reduced his working hours to part-time.

Robert must pay for any modifications to his home himself. Consequently, he only uses a board across his bath for personal washing and does not have grip bars in the wet areas (bathroom, toilet) - which increases his chance of falling.

Steve, 56

Steve was funded for a Microprocessor Knee Unit (MPK) and multi-axis prosthetic foot in his first NDIS Plan two years ago. Because of the safety of the MPK prosthesis, Steve has returned to full-time work. He has never had a fall while using it. The NDIS Plan has funded bathroom modifications and a ramp at the back of his house. Steve leads an active life including daily walks with his dog on the beach.

With the NDIS plan, Steve tested several prosthetic devices to determine which one best met his needs. He has been able to exercise choice and control over the assistive devices he uses and also his service providers.