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POLIO AUSTRALIA INCORPORATED

Representing polio survivors throughout Australia

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MEDIA ALERT

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Polio back on the political agenda

A NATIONAL Polio Strategy to address the escalating health concerns of Australia's tens of thousands of polio survivors will be the key recommendation put to a specially-assembled Federal Government Standing Committee meeting in Melbourne tomorrow.

In what will equate to the most concerted, high-level government focus into the effects of the disease since Australia was declared "polio free" in 2000, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing will tomorrow conduct a public Roundtable Forum on the Late Effects of Polio (LEOP) and Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS) at Parliament House, East Melbourne.

As Australia's population ages, a growing number of polio survivors, once fully active members of society, are now experiencing new and debilitating symptoms due to LEOP and PPS. For example, some who walked independently must now use braces, crutches or wheelchairs and make changes to their work and home lives. Adding further weight to the needs of this still largely invisible community are the untold numbers of new survivors who have migrated from developing countries where polio is either still endemic, or has only just recently been eradicated.

Although polio is often merely thought of as a distant reminder of Australia's pre-vaccine era, in recent years the lack of investment into addressing LEOP and PPS has led to the development of significant health and social burdens for survivors and their families, as well spiralling costs to Australia's health system.

Polio Australia, a not-for-profit support organisation for polio survivors throughout the country, will submit a list of recommendations to the Committee, central of which is the prioritisation of LEOP and PPS diagnosis and management on the national health agenda.

Polio Australia's recommendations call for major investments into training the medical and allied health professions so they can effectively identify and treat LEOP and PPS.

Polio Australia President, Gillian Thomas, herself a survivor, said: "*Polio survivors are to a large extent invisible in the community and the late effects are rarely recognised by health professionals as a 'condition' which is capable of immense impact.*"

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"Without the knowledge of what to look for when presented with disparate LEOP symptoms, GPs are unable to make an accurate diagnosis. Instead, the focus is on the most prevalent manifestation – usually muscle weakness and/or joint pain – and the diagnosis of 'arthritis' and/or the 'general effects of ageing' results. The patient is then referred to an equally unaware physiotherapist to 'build up muscle strength' using inappropriate, rigorous exercise routines, which exacerbate damage to the already fragile motor neurons of a person experiencing LEOP.

"This continued lack of awareness causes avoidable acute care incidents and a spiralling cost to Australia's health system.

"Survivors are increasingly forced to rely on family support, often ageing partners, to undertake daily living activities, risking additional medical issues for the very people they depend on."

Ms Thomas continued: *"Tomorrow will mark a significant day in the history of the disease in this country.*

"Despite polio survivors forming the largest single group of people with physical disabilities in Australia, this reality has not yet been recognised by policy makers. Now, after years of lobbying in Canberra, we are hopeful that this Roundtable Forum is the beginning of a very important turning point in having the many and complex health needs of Australia's polio survivors brought out of the shadows and onto the national health agenda".

FOR MEDIA:

The Roundtable Forum on Late Effects of Polio/Post-Polio Syndrome is open to the public.

Time: 10:00 am – 4:00 pm

Venue: Committee Room G.9; Parliament House of Victoria, 55 St Andrews Place, Melbourne, Victoria.

Interviews/photo opportunities:

Girish, Male, 40s – contracted polio as a child growing up in India. Girish is a musician/filmmaker and current job seeker.

Therese, Female, 50s – contracted polio in Australia. Therese's daughter Michelle was inspired to study Occupational Therapy because of her mother's condition, and is currently in her 3rd year at Deakin University.

**For information, interviews and photo opportunities, contact
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