



Media Release

National guideline to improve diagnostic practices for Australians on the autism spectrum

CANBERRA: Developed and published by Autism CRC with the financial support of the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), Australia's first national guideline for the assessment and diagnosis of autism was officially released today.

To date, the processes for the clinical assessment and diagnosis of autism have varied considerably across Australia. The guideline published today aims to create greater consistency in autism assessment and diagnostic practices across the country to ensure that all individuals and their families can receive optimal clinical care.

Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Autism CRC Chief Research Officer, said the community has been requesting a national and consistent approach to autism diagnosis for many years.

"We are pleased to officially release today a guideline that responds to this need. The guideline has been developed through a comprehensive research process and in close consultation with the clinical, autistic and broader autism communities," said Professor Andrew Whitehouse, Chief Research Officer, Autism CRC.

The recommendations of the guideline have been approved by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), which demonstrates that they are of high quality, based on best available scientific evidence and developed to rigorous standards. NHMRC approved guidelines are recognised in Australia and internationally as representing current medical knowledge and best practice health care.

"Work will now be undertaken to ensure this guideline is adopted and implemented by clinicians and services across Australia who are involved in autism assessment and diagnosis. This will ensure everyone can receive the best evidenced diagnostic practices, regardless of their age or location, and make informed decisions about next steps," said Professor Whitehouse.

NDIA Chief Executive Officer, Rob De Luca said today's announcement reinforces the NDIA's commitment to support a fact-based collaborative approach to autism and the NDIS.

"As demonstrated by the recent establishment of the Autism Advisory Group (AAG) this announcement again reflects the NDIA's commitment to working with key stakeholders and experts," Mr De Luca said.

"I am pleased to announce, through funding provided by the NDIA, Autism CRC will now undertake a trial of a functional assessment tool for autism, the recently published ASD version of the Pediatric Evaluation of Disability Inventory - Computer Adaptive Test (PEDI-CAT ASD)," Mr De Luca said.

Professor Whitehouse said that while diagnosis is an important step to help families identify the presence of a given health or medical condition, it is critical to understand not just the presence or absence of clinical diagnoses, but also the individual's unique strengths and support needs.

"For this reason, the guideline emphasises the importance of a comprehensive needs assessment, recommending this takes place at the earliest possible stage. A comprehensive needs assessment, including an assessment of functioning and medical evaluation, allows the individual and their family to be linked to the appropriate supports," said Professor Whitehouse.

"To ensure we have the most appropriate tools for comprehensive needs assessments and diagnosis, it is essential that we continue to evaluate tools emerging from research for application in the Australian context, such as the PEDI-CAT (ASD)," he said.

Dr Wenn Lawson, autistic researcher and co-Chair of the Australian Autism Research Council has also expressed his support for the guideline.

"Having a consistent and appropriate assessment and diagnosis process for autism will make the difference between gaining access to the right support, or not. I cannot stress enough the impact this will make," Dr Lawson said.

"Appropriate assessment identifies what an individual needs to enable access to learning and to life. These requirements must be implemented to enable an individual to be 'connected' rather than closed off because their needs are passed over. This Australian-first guideline provides a unified policy, nation-wide, that has the potential to make a positive difference to so many," said Dr Lawson.

More about Autism diagnosis in Australia

Autism diagnosis in Australia is a challenging issue. With no established biological marker for all individuals on the autism spectrum, diagnosis is not a straightforward task for several reasons:

- Diagnosis is based on clinical judgement of behavioural presentation
- Variability in autism symptoms, together with considerable behavioural overlap with other developmental conditions
- Clinicians have varying levels of skill and experience.

Further complicating diagnosis, considerable variance exists between diagnostic practices across and within Australian states and territories. A review of diagnostic practices in Australia conducted by Autism CRC concluded that these variances likely contribute to the inconsistent provision and availability of public services and support for autistic individuals and their families.

In June 2016, Autism CRC and the NDIA responded to these challenges by commissioning the development of Australia's first national guideline for the assessment and diagnosis of autism.

The guideline outlines processes for both diagnostic decision-making and the comprehensive assessment of individual support needs. It includes the step-by-step, best-practice process for conducting an autism assessment and is supported by case studies and templates.

To obtain a copy of the national guideline please go to www.autismcrc.com.au/national-guideline

About Autism CRC

Autism CRC was established in 2013 and is the world's first national, cooperative research effort focused on autism. Autism CRC's vision is to see autistic people empowered to discover and use their diverse strengths and interests. Its program takes a whole-of-life view, from diagnosis and the early years to the school years and into adult life.

Autism CRC provides the national capacity to develop and deliver evidence-based outcomes through its unique collaboration with the autism community, research organisations, industry and government. Currently, Autism CRC has 55 participant organisations and other partners based around Australia and internationally.

Autism CRC is committed to inclusive research practices and co-production of outcomes with those on the spectrum and their families. This will further ensure research provides practical and tangible outputs that benefit the community. For more information, visit www.autismcrc.com.au.

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