



Speech Pathology Australia briefing paper: mealtime support

Speech Pathology Australia is the national peak body for speech pathologists in Australia, representing more than 8300 members. Speech pathologists are university trained allied health professionals who specialise in diagnosing and treating speech, language, communication and swallowing problems, (dysphagia).

Background

Swallowing difficulties are common in people with complex disabilities, and can also occur as a result of medical conditions such as Motor Neurone Disease or stroke. People with swallowing difficulties may rely on others for support, both with the preparation and provision of meals (i.e. physical support to get food into their mouths, rate of eating or drinking).

Speech pathologists specialise in assessing and diagnosing swallowing problems, recommending changes to the texture of foods and fluids, and determining and reviewing what supports the person needs to allow them to eat and drink effectively, and as safely as possible. This is often called 'mealtime supports'.

Speech pathologists are key members of the team (often including Occupational Therapists, Dietitians and support workers) who provide solutions to enable persons with disabilities to participate in mealtimes which are safe, effective and enjoyable, as part of their everyday lives.

Please note that the issues we are raising relate to access and funding of services in the community setting for ongoing mealtime support needs, and not the diagnostic assessments undertaken by hospital services during an acute episode.

Issue

Representatives of Speech Pathology Australia were informed, verbally, of the NDIA's decision to remove funding for mealtime supports in a meeting with the Acting Deputy CEO, Participants & Planning, NDIA, on 22 May 2017. If mealtime support is shifted to Health, Australians with disability who have mealtime support needs would be unable to have these funded through or included in individual NDIS plans.

Speech Pathology Australia has received reports from speech pathologists and their clients that the NDIA is not approving or is removing from NDIS Plans, supports associated with mealtime needs. It is not clear if the reported inconsistencies regarding mealtime support are a result of unclear policy direction or due to misinterpretation at the planning level.

There are currently no alternative funding streams for this service through Medicare. The delivery of this service by speech pathologists would not meet the current requirements for rebates under the MBS Chronic Disease Management (CDM) items for speech pathology services, and a CDM would not provide adequate sessions or funding to enable provision of quality intervention. Australians with disability who have mealtime support needs will therefore need to privately fund these services, or 'go without', impacting on their ability to have safe, effective and enjoyable mealtimes, which in turn creates a greater risk for developing medical complications (requiring hospitalisation), or alternatively to live with the risk of death from choking.



There is a risk that important components of service provision such as dynamic assessment and interventions provided in the environment in which the person participates in meals, including working with family and disability support workers as part of a team based approach, would be compromised.

The transition of such a fundamental disability support to the health sector would be very complex for people with disability, disability support workers, speech pathologists, and hospitals, with the demand in hospital settings potentially increasing beyond capacity.

It is likely to contribute to the breakdown of the established systems and protocols which provided for coordination and continuity of care and provision of high quality supports across all of a person's environment, and managed the issues that can arise where the mainstream services intersect and overlap.

The budgetary implications for state/territory and the federal health systems could be considerable.

A number of jurisdictions have noted that their health based speech pathologists do not currently have the clinical resources to expand into this area, including assessment tools, training resources, knowledge and skills.

Providing collaborative, participation focussed, person-centred and capacity building supports in the health service delivery context is much more challenging than continuing to support the delivery of these services for people with a disability within the community.

Actions and feedback to date

Speech Pathology Australia wrote to the federal and each state/territory Minister for Health and Minister for Disability at the end of August to raise this important issue, request to meet to seek clarification and discuss the potential implications.

In response to our letters to all Ministers for Health and Disability (federal, state & territory) SPA representatives have either met with, spoken to, or received written responses, from all jurisdictions (apart from Victoria) as well as the federal Minister for Health and federal Assistant Minister for Disabilities. The general consensus has been that mealtime support should remain under Disability for funding and provision of supports i.e. funding should continue to be included in NDIS participant's individual Plans.

On 20 October we also wrote to the CEO of the NDIA informing him of our dialogue with ministers for health and disability and requesting further clarification regarding funding of mealtime support from the agency. To date we have not received a reply. We seek is clear and concise top down direction to ensure that planners, participants and providers alike are all aware of what will be funded and therefore included in individual plans, and whatever planning needed to facilitate the best possible outcome (i.e. information to participants and providers, professional development for speech pathologists, confirmation of referral pathways etc.)

If Speech Pathology Australia can assist in any other way or provide additional information please contact Ms Catherine Olsson, National Advisor Disability, on 03 9642 4899 or by emailing disability@speechpathologyaustralia.org.au

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