National Disability Services

AIDS AND EQUIPMENT:

Improving quality of life for people with a disability

1.74 million Australians with a disability rely on aids and equipment

Aids and equipment are products that assist a person with a disability by improving their functioning.[1] They assist with mobility, self-care and communication and can assist the treatment of medical conditions. They include home modifications, wheelchairs, hoists, specialised beds, and aids for eating, drinking, bathing and toileting. In most cases, the schemes provide cost-free or low cost, essential items based on eligibility criteria. Nearly half of all people with a disability use aids and equipment to enhance their independence and improve their quality of life. Generally, those aged under 65 years with a core activity restriction use an average of one or two aids each.

Aids and equipment are a vital link to a better quality of life

Timely provision of appropriate aids and equipment can be critical for people with a disability and their families. Their use provides comfort, pain relief, safety and support and can assist in the pursuit of education, training, employment and participation in community life. Aids and equipment help families to better manage their caring role and can prevent or delay the need for more costly or labour-intensive assistance.[2]

Aids and equipment schemes are fragmented

Various government departments – Commonwealth and State - and a range of non-government organisations fund and operate aids and equipment schemes. (Aids and equipment are also available for private purchase.) As a whole, however, the system is patchy, complex and difficult to navigate around, with diverse eligibility criteria and significant gaps in the availability and range of equipment. People who are blind or vision impaired are not covered by equipment schemes and are required to buy essential items, including expensive electronic travel aids, Braillers, screen magnifiers and synthetic voice software (guide dogs are provided free of charge, usually from funds raised direct from the public by guide dog associations). Adults who are deaf or hearing impaired on low incomes, and who are not eligible for the Commonwealth Hearing Services Program, are frequently unable to afford hearing aids because of their high cost and exclusion from the Medicare program.

Many people can't get the aids and equipment they need

Despite evidence of the benefits of aids and equipment, many children, young people and adults with a disability miss out[3]:

- The range of equipment is limited and supply from traditional dispensing units such as hospitals is declining. Funding for schemes is insufficient to both increase the number and range of aids available and cover the cost of maintenance, repair and replacement of loan equipment;
- There are particular problems with the cost, availability and shortage of referral services in remote areas of Australia;

[1] AIHW 'Disability: the use of aids and the role of the environment', 2003 (Summary)
[2] Dowling L, 'Children Who Live with Equipment: Report to Department of Ageing and Disability and Home Care (DADHC) – Issues Paper', Social Work Department, University of Newcastle, February 2002
[3] AIHW 'Disability: the use of aids and the role of the environment', 2003, ch.2

- Eligibility criteria for some schemes are too restrictive. The exclusion from schemes (other than CRS Australia) of people with a disability who are employed and the absence of alternatives causes financial hardship, particularly for those who require high-cost or numerous equipment items;
- Because of waiting lists, aids and equipment are often provided only after a lengthy delay. Children and young people, with their particular developmental and sudden growth patterns, can urgently require a number of expensive items in rapid succession. Sometimes the delay in provision is so great that they outgrow their original prescriptions before the required item becomes available.[4]
- Many people with a disability have low income (many rely on the Disability Support Pension), leaving little capacity to pay for items of aids or equipment.

A national strategy to provide aids and equipment is required

A 1996 study by Ernst and Young found that existing disability equipment schemes were fragmented and failed to provide adequate coverage to people in need[5]. Since then the situation has not improved. Governments should view aids and equipment as an investment that reduces the need for more costly interventions. For example, provision of the correct equipment or therapy can prevent children sustaining injuries; or extend the period for which an elderly person can live independently at home.

Several reviews of aids and equipment schemes have identified the need for national reform in this area.[6] A national strategy might involve:

- boosting private health contributions as well as public funding;
- providing holistic packages of items that meet long-term needs in a timely manner;
- a separate funding stream for high-cost, low-volume items;
- training in the selection and use of appropriate aids and equipment;
- strategies to build stronger national purchasing power in the equipment market, while retaining local individualised clinical assessment and prescription;
- a reduction of long waiting periods while applications are reviewed and processed in a number of agencies;
- more inclusive and consistent eligibility criteria; and
- re-use of recycled equipment

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Related Fact Sheets: ***What is a Disability? * Children with a Disability***

[4] Dowling L, 'Aids and Equipment … and the human dimension' in '*dis*parity', Summer 2004, ACROD
[5] 'Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement (CSDA): The Equipment Study', Ernst and Young, 1996
[6] Dowling L, 'Children Who Live with Equipment: Report to Department of Ageing and Disability and Home Care (DADHC) – Issues Paper', Social Work Department, University of Newcastle, February 2002

About National Disability Services

National Disability Services is the national industry association for disability services, representing over 650 not-for-profit organisations. Collectively, our members operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disability. NDS's members range in size from small support groups to large multi-service organisations, and are located in every State and Territory across Australia.

NDS defines its purpose under two broad categories. Firstly, it works to increase the capacity of its members to operate efficiently and effectively through provision of information, networking opportunities, and corporate partnerships. Secondly, NDS exists to make the voices of people with disabilities and their service providers heard by governments at both state/territory and federal levels. By so doing, NDS influences public policy to deliver outcomes that are responsive to the needs of people with disabilities and their providers.

NDS has a National Secretariat in Canberra and offices in every State and Territory.

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