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**EARLY DIAGNOSIS AND INTERVENTION ESSENTIAL FOR  
 CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER**  
*AMA Position Statement on Autism Spectrum Disorder 2016*

The AMA today called for coordinated action to speed up the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in children, and to provide early intervention therapies to give children with ASD the best outcomes possible.

AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, also called on the Federal Government to rule out any future narrowing of the eligibility requirements for people with ASD to access the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Launching the *AMA Position Statement on Autism Spectrum Disorder 2016* at NSW Parliament House today, Dr Gannon said that while ASD could be reliably detected at two years of age, Australian children with ASD are most commonly diagnosed just before their sixth birthday.

“There is no specific biomedical test for ASD - it cannot be diagnosed with a blood test or a scan,” Dr Gannon said.

“The number of paediatricians, child psychiatrists, and clinical psychologists working specifically in ASD is limited, and the problem is magnified in rural and remote areas, where few, if any, clinicians can make the diagnosis.

“A survey by Autism Awareness Australia found that 34 per cent of families waited more than a year for diagnosis, and close to 20 per cent waited more than two years.

“There are also no nationally consistent guidelines for GPs on what to look for, and when and how to refer a child who is suspected of having ASD.

“But early detection and diagnosis is critical, as brain plasticity – the ability of the brain to respond and remodel itself – means early intervention can make a huge difference. The earlier ASD is diagnosed, the better the outcome.”

Dr Gannon also criticised anti-vaccination activists and others who made wild and misleading claims about the cause of ASD, and peddled “miracle” cures.

“We know that an increasing number of children in Australia are being diagnosed with ASD,” Dr Gannon said.

“We don’t know whether this is because our diagnosis processes are getting better, or whether there is an actual increase in the number of children developing ASD, or a combination of both.

“But I am confident that, in time, we will fully understand the condition, and be able to debunk the myths, misunderstandings, and complete misinformation being spread about the causes and cures.

“Parents of children with a potential ASD diagnosis have enough to deal with, without being bombarded with ridiculous and misleading information.”

Peak advocacy and support group, Autism Awareness Australia, welcomes the AMA Position Statement.

The CEO of Autism Awareness Australia, Nicole Rogerson, said that, for too long, autism has been put in the ‘disability basket’, without proper recognition of the integral role doctors play in early detection and supporting families.

“GPs are often the first point of call for parents who are concerned about their child’s development, yet we are still seeing longer than necessary wait times for referrals and diagnosis,” Nicole said.

“What we know without a doubt is that early detection leads to early intervention, giving children the opportunity to have their best outcome.

“We have welcomed working with the AMA over the last year, and are delighted to see this important autism policy come to light.”

The AMA Position Statement makes the following recommendations:

- Effective and evidence-based treatments should be instituted as soon as possible to maximise the effectiveness of such therapies.
- That governments, the relevant Medical Colleges, and professional bodies ensure that there are a suitable number of clinicians and other professionals to ensure timely access to diagnostic assessment for children who are suspected of having ASD.
- That medical practitioners work with families and teachers, who spend lengthy periods of time with a child, and seek their insights and observations.
- That comprehensive guidelines and/or minimum national standards for referral practices and diagnostic assessments be developed.
- That there be ongoing research into the effectiveness of current and novel therapies.
- That all health professionals who interact with children be encouraged to develop and maintain their understanding of early signs and symptoms of ASD.
- That the Government make a strong, ongoing commitment, that people who are affected by ASD will have ongoing access to support through the NDIS.

Dr Gannon said the NDIS must remain accessible to families affected by ASD.

“In many of the NDIS trial sites, there was unanticipated demand for support packages for children with ASD – at one site, almost half of all participants had an ASD diagnosis,” Dr Gannon said.

“While the sustainability of the NDIS is not currently under threat, demand that outweighs resourcing may eventually lead to narrowing the eligibility requirements.

“This would threaten access to vital early intervention treatments.

“The AMA calls on the Government to guarantee ongoing access to the NDIS for people with ASD.”

The *AMA Position Statement on Autism Spectrum Disorder 2016* is available at <https://ama.com.au/position-statement/autism-spectrum-disorder-2016>.

**Background:**

- Autism is a broad term used to describe developmental disabilities characterised by difficulties in social interaction, impaired communication, restricted and repetitive interests and behaviours, and sensory activities. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a term that is used to recognise that the range of difficulties occur on a spectrum.
  - There is no reliable data on the prevalence of ASD in Australia but, based on United Kingdom estimates, and ABS data, approximately 230,000 children in Australia could meet the diagnostic criteria for ASD.
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