



MS Australia's response to the May 2023-24 Federal Budget – Impact on the MS community

The 2023-24 Federal Budget was delivered on 9 May 2023.

MS Australia's analysis of this Budget is through the lens of the two areas of fundamental need for people living with MS – firstly, better treatments, prevention and ultimately, a cure for the disease and secondly improved support for management and care, particularly through systemic improvements to the health care, disability and aged care sectors.

Medicines

MS Australia welcomes changes to some Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) medicines to allow Australians to buy two months' worth of medicine for the price of a single (one month) prescription. For some Australian this will ensure cheaper medicines, reduce time spent accessing medicines and reduce the instances of missing doses:

- \$1.2 billion by allowing 2 months' worth of [certain PBS medicines](#) to be dispensed by pharmacies from 1 September 2023. Per year, per medicine, concession card holders may save up to \$43.80 and general patients may save up to \$180.

Medicare

MS Australia welcomes the substantial investment in this budget of \$3.5 billion in bulk billing incentives, which represents the largest increase to these incentives in the 40-year history of Medicare. This funding will increase the rates of bulk billing and make healthcare more affordable for the many people living with MS who are pensioners and concession card holders.

MS Australia welcomes the introduction of a new Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) item for longer consultations for patients with chronic conditions and complex needs. For people living with MS this will ensure they can get the GP support that they need to manage their condition. This is especially important for those living in regional, rural and remote regions that may have limited access to a neurologist and rely on GP support to meet their health needs:

- \$99 million to establish a new MBS item for a longer consultation of 60 minutes or more to support improved access and service affordability for patients with chronic conditions and complex needs.

Support for people living with a disability

Many people living with MS struggle to access and retain employment that is flexible, adaptable and meets their individual needs. MS Australia welcomes funding in this budget to improve supported employment for people with disability, including:

- \$35 million to establish a structural adjustment fund to assist supported employment organisations to evolve their business models
- \$11.7 million to establish a targeted disability employment advocacy service and information program for supported employees

- \$6 million to evaluate existing supported employment initiatives and trials, pilot job expos for supported employees and their families, and help organisations transition to the revised award
- \$3.2 million to extend the Job Access Complaints Resolution and Referral Service and the National Disability Abuse and Neglect Hotline
- \$1.1 million in 2023–24 to undertake initial research, design and consultation work in preparation for the establishment of a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence.

MS Australia welcomes funding to ensure the central coordination of disability policy and better outcomes under *Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031*, including:

- \$10.2 million to establish a Central Coordination of Disability Policy function in the Department of Social Services, to drive whole-of-government action on disability policy and improve accountability against *Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031*.
- \$5.0 million to develop and implement an Arts and Disability Associated Plan under *Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031*.

MS Australia also welcomes funding to improve data on Australians with disability to inform policy development and services delivery including:

- \$31.4 million to meet the remaining costs of establishing the National Disability Data Asset (NDDA) and its underlying infrastructure – the Australian National Data Integration Infrastructure.

The Budget also includes the following measures to support people living with disability and their families:

- \$17.7 million for the Higher Education Disability Support Program to enable providers to better support students with disability to access and succeed in higher education
- \$1 million under the National Disability Advocacy Program to extend individual advocacy support for First Nations people with disability.

Support for Older People with a Disability

MS Australia welcomes the extension and ongoing funding of the *Disability Support for Older Australians Program* which provides support to vulnerable older people with disability who are not eligible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme:

- \$487 million over 4 years (and \$133.6 million ongoing) to extend, and make ongoing, the Disability Support for Older Australians Program.

National Disability Insurance Scheme MS Australia has advocated over many years for improvements to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) including around planning and assistive technology. We welcome the improvements to the NDIS outlined in this budget including:

- Allowing for longer plans for participants, where appropriate.
- Making it easier for participants to access evidence-based assistive technology and other supports through the establishment of an expert advisory panel and preferred provider arrangements.

MS Australia welcomes the following funding to support the NDIS:

- \$13 million to the Department of Social Services to ensure it has resources to continue to provide policy advice and oversight of the NDIS and NDIA.
- \$732.9 million over 4 years to support participant outcomes and the effective and sustainable operation of the Scheme. Funding includes:
 - Funding for the NDIA's capability and systems, to improve processes and planning decisions
 - Improved supported for participants to manage their plan within budget
 - Funding to support a lifetime approach to ensure plans are more transparent and flexible for life events
 - Strengthening Independent living decisions, including by introducing a home and living panel to improve consistency across decisions and updating guidelines for planners to improve participants' ability to live independently
 - Investment in the NDIA's ability to detect, respond to, and reduce fraud and non-compliant payments
 - Support to improve the quality and effectiveness of services through increasing take up of evidence-based supports
 - Support for participants and providers to trial blended payment models, to increase incentives for providers to innovate service delivery and improve outcomes
 - Partnering with communities to pilot alternative commissioning approaches to improve access to supports in remote and First Nations communities.
- \$142.6 million to support the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission in carrying out its role of safeguarding NDIS participants.

Aged Care

Many older Australians living with MS must pursue their disability needs through the aged care system. MS Australia has advocated for changes to the aged care system to better meet the needs of older people with disability and provide high quality, person-centre care. MS Australia welcomes the following funding that will improve and strengthen the aged care system:

- \$309.9 million implement the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety and other initiatives to strengthen the regulation of the aged care sector and improve the health and safety of older Australians receiving aged care, including
 - Enhancements to the Star Rating system
 - The development and implementation of a new, stronger Aged Care Regulatory Framework to support the new Age Care Act
 - ICT infrastructure to establish a national worker screening and registration scheme from 1 July 2024
 - Resourcing for the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission to deliver its audit and compliance program.
 - Improvements to food and nutrition in aged care through the development, monitoring and enforcement of food and nutritional standard

- \$338.7 million to improve the in-home aged care system including
 - an additional 9,500 Home Care Packages
 - ICT changes to enable the new Support at Home Program
 - Independent Health and Aged Care Pricing Authority to undertake pricing and costing research activities
 - Establish a single aged care assessment system, including the establishment of a First Nations assessment workforce
 - Run a trial to test products and services for a new assistive technologies loan program, commencing in July 2024 within 2 states and territories
 - Establish the Aged Care Sustainability Taskforce to provide advice to Government on the creation and maintenance of a high quality and sustainable aged care system
 - Independent Implementation Readiness Assessment of the aged care reforms.
- \$827.2 million to continue to improve the delivery of aged care services and respond to the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, including:
 - A new General Practice in Aged Care incentive payment to improve general practitioner attendance and continuity of care in residential aged care homes, and to reduce avoidable hospitalisations
 - A new Market Adjustment Program and to provide business advisory services to improve the viability of the residential aged care sector
 - A new Aged Care Act to support aged care sector reform and undertake discovery and design of associated ICT system changes
 - A new place assignment system, allowing older Australians to select their residential aged care provider
 - Additional funding for the Independent Health and Aged Care Pricing Authority

MS Australia has advocated for a renewed focus on supporting younger people with disability to leave residential aged care and an increase in the availability of age-appropriate specialist disability accommodation. MS welcomes the following funding to support younger people to leave residential aged care:

- \$7.3 million for a package of initiatives to further reduce the number of people under the age of 65 living in residential aged care, including:
 - targeted education and training packages for GPs, clinical staff, social workers, carers, advocates, families, and organisations that support young people with disability
 - establishing a central function in the Department of Health and Aged Care to support nationally consistent decision making
 - evaluating actions already taken by governments to reduce the number of younger people in residential aged care, to inform future initiatives.

Disability & Aged Care Workforce

MS Australia welcomes measures to support people working in the disability and aged care workforce and to support more people to enter the workforce, including:

- \$515 million to fund the outcome of the Fair Work Commission's decision on the Aged Care Work Value Case. This will increase award wages by 15 per cent from 30 June 2023 for many aged care workers. The funding includes
 - Funding to support aged care providers to cover the increase in award wages, shortfall in care recipients home care packages, service viability and historical leave provisions.
 - Funding for a targeted indexation boost for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care programs and employment initiatives
 - Funding for implementation costs for the Department of Health and Aged Care and Services Australia.
- \$15.2 million to support the establishment of the Y Careers Agency to provide young people with employment opportunities in the care economy, including the disability and aged care sectors
- \$14.1 million from for targeted financial support for disability workers who deliver personal support to NDIS participants, contract COVID-19, and do not have access to leave entitlements. This will support vulnerable Australians by lowering the risk of COVID-19 transmission in high-risk disability settings.

Chronic Conditions

MS Australia welcomes funding to refresh the [National Strategic Framework for Chronic Conditions](#) and align the Framework with other strategies and National Strategic Action Plans including the National Preventive Health Strategy, as well as new evidence and international policies. MS Australia calls on the Government to ensure that Neurological Conditions are included in this framework.

Energy Concessions

People living with MS use household energy at higher rates than average and therefore have significant energy expenses, as 90% of people with MS are heat intolerant. MS Australia acknowledges that there are a range of energy concessions in the budget that will provide energy price relief, including:

- \$3 billion of electricity bill relief for eligible households and small businesses. From July 2023, this plan will deliver up to \$500 in electricity bill relief for eligible households.
- \$1.3 billion for the Household Energy Upgrades Fund to create low-interest loans and fund upgrades to social housing to improve energy performance. Retrofitting homes to improve energy efficiency will reduce energy usage, and therefore bills, for occupants by up to one third.
- \$36.7 million to provide households with access to better information about where they can save energy and reduce their energy bills through the Nationwide House Energy Rating Scheme.

Income Support

MS Australia welcomes the Government increasing the rate of income support payments, costing \$4.9 billion over the next 5 years. This will provide economic relief for people with disability living in poverty. In particular, for older Australians who face additional challenges in re-engaging with employment, particularly when living with a chronic health condition. However, MS Australia recognises that the \$20 a week increase to JobSeeker, Austudy and Youth Allowance is less than the finding from the [Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee](#), that an increase of \$128 per week is needed to ensure that people can cover basic household expenses. Funding measures to provide income support relief include:

- Increase in the base rate of working age and student payments by \$40 per fortnight. This increase applies to the JobSeeker Payment, Youth Allowance, Parenting Payment (Partnered), Austudy, ABSTUDY, Disability Support Pension (Youth), and Special Benefit. It will commence on 20 September 2023
- Funding for expansion of eligibility for the existing higher rate of JobSeeker to recipients 55 and over who have received the payment for 9 or more continuous months, which currently applies to those 60 and over. Around 52,000 eligible recipients will receive an increase in their base rate of payment of \$92.10 per fortnight.
- Commonwealth Rent Assistance increasing by 15 per cent at a cost of \$2.7 billion. Providing additional income support to low-income households who rent.

Smoking

Recognising that tobacco is a major risk factor for MS, MS Australia welcomes budget measures aimed at reducing the prevalence of vaping and smoking, including:

- \$63.4 million for national public health campaigns to prevent uptake and reduce smoking and vaping including a targeted youth campaign. An additional \$141.2 million to prevent the uptake, and reduce the prevalence, of vaping by First Nations Australians.
- \$29.5 million to increase and enhance supports to quit together with stronger regulation and enforcement of e-cigarettes, including new controls on their importation, contents and packaging.
- Raising the tax on tobacco by 5 per cent each year for 3 years from 1 September 2023 and ensuring that loose leaf tobacco is taxed equally to cigarettes.

Nurses and allied health professionals

MS Australia welcomes funding to expand the role of nurses and allied health professionals to make full use of their knowledge and training, and to work to their scope of practice. A skilled, well-distributed and resourced primary care workforce will ensure better access to healthcare professionals for people living with MS across Australia. Nurses and allied health professionals play an integral role in the multidisciplinary team of healthcare professionals providing support, education, advice, and care for people with MS and their family and carers. Funding measures include:

- \$10.7 million for primary care placements. An Increase in the number of nurses in primary care, by funding an extra 6,000 clinical placements over 4 years. Funding to support 500 nurses to return to the workforce, and expanding the availability of courses for nurses to transition to primary care practice

- \$79.4 million over 4 years for Primary Health Network funding to commission multidisciplinary care from allied health professionals and nurses to support primary care practices in underserved areas. In particular, small practices, to increase patient access and improve the management of chronic conditions.
- \$81.8 million for changes to scholarship arrangements. Focusing on nursing, First Nations health workers and international medical graduates, these scholarships will boost the workforce in regional and rural areas and areas of workforce shortage including aged care.

Research

MS Australia welcomes the commitment in this budget to a 3.6% increase over 2022-2023 funding for the NHMRC. This brings the NHMRC in line with inflation and is welcome news for the research community. However, MS Australia is concerned that the funding for the Medical Research Future Fund remains static at \$650m per annum, meaning it fails to keep up with inflation and is declining in real terms.

MS Australia welcomes funding of \$90.9 million to establish an Australian Centre for Disease Control to help detect, prevent and respond to current and emerging health threats.