

MS AUSTRALIA'S RESPONSE TO THE 2024-25 FEDERAL BUDGET

IMPACT ON THE MS COMMUNITY

The 2024-25 Federal Budget was delivered on 14 May 2024.

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.

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 significant invest for \$2.2b in this budget to deliver key aged care reforms and to continue to implement recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety including:

- \$531.4m to release an additional 24,100 Home Care Packages in 2024-25
- \$110.9m over 4 years to increase the regulatory capability of the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission
- \$1.2b in critical digital systems to support the introduction of the new Aged Care Act and deliver a contemporary IT system
- \$37m for the My Aged Care Contact Centre to reduce wait times for people seeking information and access to aged care
- \$32.1m for a Specialist Dementia Care Program

MS Australia also welcomes the Government's commitment to fund the Fair Work Commission decision to increase award wages for aged care workers and \$87.2m for workforce initiatives to attract nurses and other workers into aged care.

National Disability Insurance Scheme

MS Australia has advocated over many years for improvements to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) including four submissions to the *NDIS Review*:

- [Submission to the NDIS Review](#) – December 2022
- [NDIS Quality & Safeguarding Framework](#) – May 2023
- [Pricing & Payment Approaches in the NDIS Market](#) – July 2023
- [What we have heard report – submission on solutions](#) – August 2023

MS Australia welcomed the release of the final report of the NDIS Review and believes that the implementation of the report's recommendations is crucial to reforming and rebuilding the NDIS. MS Australia welcomes the \$468.7m to support people with disability and get the NDIS back on track including:

- \$214m over two years to fight fraud and to co-design NDIS reforms with people with disability (announced earlier this year)
- \$160.7m to upgrade the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission's information technology
- \$45.5m to establish a NDIS Evidence Advisory Committee
- \$20m to start consultation and design on reforms to help NDIS participants and people with disability navigate services

This funding will support the commencement of NDIS reforms, however, further investment will be needed in the coming years to ensure all the NDIS Review recommendations are acted on and that the NDIS can reach its full potential. MS Australia will continue to advocate for improved funding in this space.

Research

MS Australia welcomes the commitment in this budget of \$411.6m (for a total \$1.6b over 13 years) through the Medical Research Future Fund to continue existing research missions and to introduce two new research missions for low-survival cancers and reducing health inequities. We also welcome \$18.8m for a National One Stop Shop to harmonise and streamline the administration and regulation of health and medical research.

MRIs

MRI scans are an essential part of MS diagnosis and for ongoing monitoring of disease progression. It is crucial that people living with MS have access to affordable MRI scans wherever they live. MS Australia welcomes the investment of \$69.8m to increase the number of Medicare eligible MRI machines which will ensure every single practice with MRI equipment will be able to provide Medicare funded services.

PBS Medicines

MS Australia welcomes access to cheaper medicines as part a \$3b agreement with community pharmacies including:

- A one-year freeze on the maximum PBS patient co-payment for everyone with a Medicare card
- A five-year freeze for pensioners and other concession cardholders with no one paying more than \$7.70 (plus any applicable manufacturer premiums) for up to five years

Disability employment

As outlined in our submissions to the [NDIS Review](#) and the [Extent and Nature of Poverty](#) Senate inquiry, there is an urgent need for a new disability employment program that has a focus on the needs of people with disability over program compliance and on sustained long-term and meaningful employment for people with disability. MS Australia welcomes investment in disability employment, including:

- \$227.6m for the establishment of a new specialised disability employment program to replace the existing Disability Employment Services program by 1 July 2025

- \$54m for two new paid work placement programs pilot to support for job seekers with barriers to work
- \$2.6m to extend for the National Disability Abuse and Neglect Hotline and Complaints Resolution and Referral Service will receive in funding to ensure service continuity and support people with disability to access fair, impartial and independent advice and to voice their concerns regarding the delivery of supports.

As outlined in our submission on the establishment of a [Disability Employment Centre of Excellence](#), MS Australia supports the establishment of this Centre and hopes this will improve employment outcomes for Australians living with MS. MS Australia welcomes funding of \$23.3m over 4 years to establish the Centre and develop best practice, evidence-based information and training to help providers deliver high quality effective employment services.

Carer Payment

Given the diversity in disease presentation and progression, people with MS require a broad and diverse range of support that often includes care delivered by family and friends. Recognition, acknowledgement and support for the vital role of carers is a crucial component of maintaining the carer in this role. MS Australia estimates that there are approximately 29,000 MS carers across Australia¹ for the 33,335 people living with MS. MS Australia welcomes funding and reforms to better supports carers including:

- \$18.6m over five years to support 31,000 Carer Payment recipients through increased flexibility to undertake work, study and volunteering activities
- An increase in the participation limit for Carer Payment recipients from 25 to 100 hours per week and changes to the limit to that it will no longer capture study, volunteering activities and travel time and will only apply to employment. Additionally, Carer Payment recipients exceeding the participation limit or their allowable temporary cessation of care days will have their payments suspended for up to six months, rather than cancelled.

Mental Health

Many people living with MS experience poor mental health including depression and anxiety. Access to mental health supports are crucial to improving their mental and physical wellbeing. MS Australia welcomes the significant investment in mental health in this budget with a \$888.1m package over eight years including:

- For people with mild mental health concerns, a new national, free low-intensity digital service
- An upgraded national network of 61 Medicare Mental Health Centres built on the established Head to Health network to provide clinical services for adults with moderate to severe mental health needs
- For people who have complex needs, funding for Primary Health Networks to work in partnerships with GPs to deliver multidisciplinary wraparound supports and care coordination.

Energy Concessions

As outlined in our submissions to the [Extent and Nature of Poverty](#) and [Cost of Living](#) Senate inquiries, living with MS means high energy use, primarily because 90 per cent of people with MS are heat intolerant and run their air conditioners 15 times more than average households². This high energy use, combined with rising energy costs, results in significant energy expenses for people living with MS and their families. MS Australia welcomes the \$3.5b energy relief bill which includes an energy rebate of \$300 for every Australian household from 1 July 2024.

Income Support

As outlined in our submissions to the [Extent and Nature of Poverty](#) and [Cost of Living](#) Senate inquiries, many people living with MS rely on the Disability Support Pension or JobSeeker payments as their main source of income. The current rates of these government payments are not adequate to meet the full costs of people living with MS and this causes considerable economic distress and impacts their health and wellbeing. MS Australia welcomes measures in this budget to improve income support including:

- \$1.9b over five years to increase Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 10 per cent
- Extending eligibility for the existing higher rate of JobSeeker Payment to around 4,700 single recipients
- Extending the freeze on deeming rates for 876,000 income support recipients

MS Australia notes that these changes to income support do not match the recommendations of the [Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee](#), which recommended a substantial increase in the rate of JobSeeker to 90% of the Age Pension and an increase in the rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance to better reflect the current Australian rental market³.

MS Australia also welcomes \$138m to meet sustained high demand for crisis support including emergency relief, food relief and financial support services.

Nurses

As outlined in the [MS Nurse Care in Australia](#) report, MS Nurses are an integral part of the multidisciplinary healthcare team of specialist healthcare professionals providing support, education, advice, and care for people with MS and their family and carers. Attracting more people to study nursing is crucial to increase the number of nurses across Australia. MS Australia welcomes the \$427.4m over four years to establish the Commonwealth Prac Payment. This will provide a payment of \$319.50 per week to tertiary students undertaking supervised mandatory placements as part of their nursing studies.

MS Australia also welcomes funding of \$227m over three years to boost and expand Medicare Urgent Care Clinics. The addition of 29 Clinics across Australia will reduce pressure on hospital emergency departments and provide greater access to both GPs and nurses for people needing urgent, non-life-threatening care.

References

- 1 According to a 2019 KPMG study commissioned by MS Australia, 87% of people living with MS have someone (unpaid or informal) who is their main source of support: KPMG (2019). *Living with Multiple Sclerosis in 2019: the needs of people living with multiple sclerosis, their families and carers*. Retrieved from: <https://www.msaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/living-with-multiple-sclerosis-in-2019-report.pdf>
- 2 MS Australia and University of South Australia (2014). *Domestic Energy Use by Australians with Multiple Sclerosis including Medically Required Cooling*.
- 3 Economic Advisory Committee (2024). *2024 Report to Government*. Retrieved from: https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/04_2024/13404-eiac-report-dv-08.pdf