

## **SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS REPORT**

**Sally Sullivan**

I am pleased to present my first report as the Specific Education Needs portfolio leader on a very steep learning curve. Three motions passed at the 2016 Federal Conference fall into this portfolio. The number of motions however is not a true reflection of the magnitude of the challenges of educating children with specific needs in rural and remote areas. Broadly, issues include: early identification of learning difficulties, access to services, the cost of accessing services and support for gifted students.

Telehealth services are offering exciting opportunities for delivering services to rural and remote students. Such services include speech pathology, mental health consultations, occupational therapy intervention to aid fine motor skill development and even capacity building to support educators and parents dealing with children experiencing difficulties. Royal Far West and University of NSW are partnering to research the use of telehealth to provide intervention for children with behavioural and emotional difficulties. On the downside, the extent and advancement of service networks, internet capabilities in the bush and the Medicare system combine to create a lag in the widespread availability, accessibility and adoption of these technologies.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) adds a new dimension to the portfolio. Some participants in the Scheme may be attending school and require additional support as a result of their disability. The Scheme will fund supports that enable participants to attend school education such as: assistance with self-care at school, specialist transport, transportable equipment and specialised or intensive support to transition between schools, or from school to post-school options. The education system has a responsibility to provide the staff and resources necessary for education *per se*. The NDIS participant's plan will include the supports the Scheme will fund for participants and those supports which are the responsibility of the education system. As AIC is also designed to support students to attend school education, in regional areas there may be some interaction between AIC entitlements and NDIS supports. For further information visit [ndis.gov.au](http://ndis.gov.au) and search education.

The state of play of specific lobbies of ICPA in 2016/17 follows.

### **Medicare rebate item number attached to relevant Telehealth providers**

ICPA welcomed the announcement in April 2017 of the introduction of a new Medicare rebate for online videoconferencing consultations with psychologists. From November 1, people in rural and regional Australia will be able to claim a Medicare rebate for online videoconferencing consultations with psychologists and other mental health professionals. This initiative will hopefully provide a precedent for other telehealth services where there is clear evidence of its effectiveness. At present, no rebate exists for Speech Language Pathology (SLP) via Telehealth delivery. However, research into one on one sessions for Allied Health appointments via Telehealth suggests it is as effective as face to face sessions. Parents can claim about \$52 per session for 5 sessions a year for *face to face* consultations, but no rebate exists for telehealth sessions. As Telehealth web conferencing is growing exponentially as a recognised mode of delivery, especially for rural and remote students, a Medicare rebate must be assigned to Telehealth appointments as a matter of urgency.

ICPA (Aust) has lobbied the Minister for Health and Aged Care and the Treasurer by correspondence and this motion was discussed with Members of Parliament where possible on delegation. In response to correspondence from ICPA (Aust) in late 2016, the Hon Dr David Gillespie MP (Assistant Minister for Rural

Health) wrote that MBS Items that may be reviewed by the Mental Health Services Clinical Committee in 2017 will include psychiatry, speech pathology, GP mental health and psychology items. ICPA (Aust) is also represented by Judy Sinclair-Newton on the National Rural Health Alliance Council providing another conduit for increasing awareness of telehealth-related lobbies.

### **Workshops for parents of gifted children**

ICPA (Aust) has lobbied the Minister for Education and Training, by correspondence and this motion was discussed with Members of Parliament where possible on delegation. The Minister suggested the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRE), commencing in mid-2017, will provide an opportunity to make submissions around our motions, such as this one.

Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC) at the University of New South Wales has been contacted regarding the potential for delivering workshops. Indications from GERRIC are that our request is in keeping with their policy position.

Going forward, ICPA (Aust) anticipates making a submission to the IRRRE and continuing negotiations with GERRIC about the provision of parent workshops and subsequent exploration of funding solutions if necessary. The engagement of other potential deliverers of workshops such as the University of New England is also being explored.

### **All rural and remote students have access to identification and intervention for learning difficulties**

ICPA (Aust) has lobbied Minister Birmingham, Minister for Education and Training, by correspondence and this motion was discussed with Members of Parliament where possible on delegation. In response, the Minister suggested the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, commencing in 2017, will provide an opportunity to make submissions around motions such as this.

According to a media report on 29 Jan 2017, the Federal Government is considering introducing mandatory phonics, maths and literacy testing for Year One students. The Education and Training Minister says "This is about identifying where there are younger students developing their literacy and numeracy skills effectively and appropriately, and if they're not, ensuring that early interventions can take place so that they don't fall further and further behind."

Through submissions and further correspondence, ICPA will continue to lobby for screening of phonological awareness by teachers to identify at risk students to be done in their first term at school and to stress that the single most important factor and predictor of successful literacy acquisition is phonological awareness.

A further lobby in the Tertiary Portfolio also relates to the Specific Education Needs Portfolio: that universities that provide teacher training include modules such as Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) in their curriculum. With the alarming rate of increase in the diagnosis of ASD, a newly graduated teacher is likely to have a student with ASD in their class. Knowing how to manage this condition with an appropriate level of skills and knowledge in behaviour management strategies for ASD would provide beneficial outcomes for the whole class. This training could reduce teacher burnout and increase retention of teachers in rural and remote areas, as well as having obvious benefits to the student/s.

The progression of Specific Education Needs lobbies is slow but we hope persistence and common sense will see more attention paid to the needs of rural and remote special needs students and better access to specialist services into the future.