



20 December 2006

The Secretary
Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission to Senate Inquiry from NovitaTech
RE: Fourth Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement

NovitaTech (the technology Division of Novita Children's Services Inc in Adelaide) is one of Australia's leading rehabilitation engineering centres dedicated to all aspects of assistive technology provision – from research through to delivery – for people of all ages. We have joint projects with Universities, corporate enterprises and individual people internationally.

Having been at the forefront of developments in assistive technology in Australia for thirty years, we bring a wealth of experience in service delivery outcomes and the changing place and style of technology in benefiting those with disabilities or who are ageing. Over that period we have been actively involved in assisting the development of policy at state and federal level in the field. We would like to support the submission put to the Inquiry by Independent Living Centres Australia (ILCA, Submission 38 and supplementary submissions) regarding the importance of appropriately providing both assistive technology and the support services necessary for its successful use.

As noted in the Submission by ILCA there is a large body of evidence supporting the cost effectiveness of assistive technology to enable people with disabilities, and those who are ageing, to maintain a level of independent living that maximises their participation in our community, and consequently their health. The Inquiry may draw valuable current information from the recently published Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) publication 'Therapy and equipment needs of people with cerebral palsy and like disabilities in Australia.'¹ This study identified the strong perceived benefit of both therapy and equipment to people with cerebral palsy but also highlighted the substantial unmet need in this client group. Families and people with disabilities are cited as calling for:

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2006. Therapy and equipment needs of people with cerebral palsy and like disabilities in Australia. Disability Series. Cat. no. DIS 49. Canberra: AIHW.



NovitaTech (formerly Regency Park Rehabilitation Engineering)
a division of **Novita Children's Services Inc.** (formerly The Crippled Children's Association of SA)
171 Days Road, Regency Park, South Australia 5010
PO Box 2438, Regency Park, South Australia 5942
Telephone 1300 855 585 • Fax (08) 8243 8208
enquiries@novita.org.au • www.novitatech.org.au
ABN 47 993 053 341



- Appropriate equipment that fits the environment
- Funding schemes that take into account the needs of an individual
- Timeliness of provision – especially for growing children.

Some of the quotes provided in the report reflect some of the stories we have heard from clients:

'A child seen 18 months ago needed a few hundred dollars of modifications made to their wheelchair.

These modifications didn't occur and now the child has developed deformities, with around \$12,000 now needed to provide a new wheelchair and to pay for required surgery.'

One child required a wheelchair with appropriate seating to help cope with aspiration and swallowing problems. Medical complications developed while on the waiting list. [The child] ended up with a gastrostomy [tube] instead of a wheelchair.²

We are concerned that despite the growing evidence of the value of assistive technology, it is generally supported through “discretionary” or one-off funding. It would seem this proven approach is perceived by our policy makers as a peripheral aspect of meeting the needs of people with disabilities and the ageing. The following points illustrate this impression.

1. Several submissions (and Senators) have highlighted examples of the fragmented systems across the states and the lack of Commonwealth support or even guidance to achieve a consistent and equitable approach.
2. Despite developing a heavily industry focused program in Biomedical Engineering (in which we play a part as both content provider and student placement host), the lack of funding to support trainee places for graduates has seen talent lost from the sector. In the last two weeks we have been informed that one of the key training courses for our potential employees (and for other health centres nationally) at the Flinders University in South Australia is to be closed down.
3. We have sought to embrace the higher quality of service delivery expected as part of the *Therapeutic Goods Act*, and actively worked to support the Authority to inform the sector. Yet the Therapeutic Goods Administration remains uncertain when it will finalise the requirements for assistive technology, leaving the public exposed to potentially hazardous items.
4. With some notable exceptions, government procurement, repair and maintenance of assistive technology often fails to consider technical standards, levels of quality, or clinical effectiveness – and focuses mostly on initial purchase cost.
5. No government scheme in Australia supports the costs of “developing” a solution for a client with complex needs.
6. Our award winning research into telecommunications access solutions for people with disabilities struggles to continue. Despite the high demand for our information and advisory services, staff survive on 6 month research grants primarily supported by the Australian Government Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts. There is no dedicated funding/research body to support research and development in assistive technology despite often unique requirements of the technology in Australia.
7. A recent Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) bid in this field (led by NovitaTech, Flinders University of South Australia, the Queensland University of Technology and a number of national and international partners) did not progress beyond stage 1. The proposed *Technologies for Independent Living CRC*, sought to develop, commercialise, train and support the growing field of assistive technology here in Australia, and establish a sustainable and competitive workforce and sector.

² Op cit, p91

NovitaTech and our partners nationally and internationally would welcome the opportunity to work with government and users to develop a holistic and consistent approach to the development and provision of assistive technology as part of a future CSTDA. Our experience is that people with the appropriate equipment become more productive and engaged members of our society, taking roles at all social strata. There is considerable potential to improve workforce participation – but also facilitate healthy ageing in our community.

Yours sincerely



Glenn Rappensberg
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
Novita Children's Services Inc



Dr Lloyd Walker
DIRECTOR - NOVITATECH