

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

Dear Secretary,

The Continence Foundation of Australia would like to make this submission to the Australian Senate Community Affairs Committee - Inquiry into the costs of living pressures on older Australians.

Our apologies for the late submission to the inquiry which has only been brought to our attention today and therefore the format is far from desirable but hopefully will outline the plight of so many Australians living with chronic incontinence and who struggle to maintain social continence and quality of life.

Incontinence is a complex and widespread health issue affecting people of all ages and backgrounds. Its effects are distressing and wide-reaching. Its physical, social and personal consequences can influence and erode a person's lifestyle and participation in society. Carers also often deal with an increasing burden in trying to manage incontinence. At-risk groups include people with disabilities, chronic illness, post-operative complications, women pre- and post-delivery and the elderly.

The Australian Government National Continence Management Strategy has substantially increased community and consumer awareness of the prevalence of incontinence, and of its prevention, treatment and management options. However the major gap in current initiatives is the equitable and effective support for people with moderate and severe incontinence who need clinical and financial assistance with continence management products.

Further work needs to be undertaken to ?

- Assess the national coverage and equity of current services providing supported access to continence management products;
- Assess the cost effectiveness of current services; and
- Identify unmet need and the flow on health and cost consequences to individuals and the health and community care service system.

In response to these needs the Continence Foundation of Australia (CFA) has developed the attached position statement *Managing Continence: Supported Access to Continence Management Products*, November 2006. The paper summarises the provision of, and access to, continence management products, both disposable and reusable as at that date but does not incorporate the welcome changes introduced in the Federal 2007 budget to broaden the eligibility criteria for the Australian Government's Continence Aids Assistance Scheme (CAAS). The information and data are sourced from a paper developed by the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council (AHMAC) Continence Working Group in 2004; various publications and reports of the National Continence Management Strategy; and analysis of consumer outcomes and concerns by the CFA.

Our position paper focuses on national, state and territory services that provide access to continence management products for people with moderate or severe incontinence. The paper has been prepared following consultation with our professional and consumer membership and key stakeholder peak bodies.

At present there is a patchwork of arrangements between States and Territories and the Commonwealth that provide continence subsidy services.

The available services are targeted principally to people with disabilities and incontinence, and historically largely excluded the wider population with regular and persistent incontinence but without any additional co-existing disability.

The CFA proposes that these issues could be addressed through a National Continence Management Assistance Program. An equitable and nationally effective program would comprise:

- Clinical and means assessment for access to financial or product assistance with continence management for all persons with moderate to severe incontinence; and
- Financial or purchasing access to disposable and reusable continence assistance products for all eligible persons.

Such a national scheme should ?

- Reduce discrimination;
- Improve access;
- Provide a more cost effective and efficient service; and
- Significantly reduce wastage (such as stockpiling), remove administrative duplication, and importantly,
- Return value for money to government with downstream benefits through reduced costs in residential care, and in the social impacts around depression, lifestyle and employment.

The recommendations in the position paper address these objectives and the scheme as proposed would complement the current national continence assistance services provided by the Department of Veterans' Affairs Rehabilitation Appliances Program and the national Stoma Appliance Scheme.

Recommendation 2 in the paper recommends a National Continence Management Assistance Program for children and adults with moderate to severe incontinence should be established, that:

- is non-discriminatory by age or condition;
- is accessible on eligibility criteria based on severity of symptoms and impact; and
- provides financial assistance with access to continence products and supplies.

The Continence Aids Assistance Scheme (CAAS) is administered by the Australian Government through the Department of Health and Ageing. The CAAS provides assistance in defraying the costs of continence aids and historically was limited to people between the ages of 16 and 65 years, with people over the age of 65 years able to access the Scheme if they could establish that they work in paid employment of at least eight hours per week. The Department has responsibility for the Scheme on behalf of the Australian government. The administration of the CAAS is currently contracted out. The Scheme commenced in 1992. It was originally developed as an entitlement scheme and was targeted at working age people (then considered to be between 16 and 65 years of age) and who were eligible to receive either the Disability Support Pension or the Mobility Allowance. The aim of the Scheme was to assist eligible clients with a permanent disability to overcome disability specific costs that create barriers to seeking and obtaining employment and participating in the community.

The Scheme prior to 1 July 2007 had approximately 18,500 eligible clients who each receive up to \$470.00 a year worth of continence products from the contracted supplier and administrator of the Scheme.

Government funding of \$11.5 million per year was provided for the Scheme and there had been an annual growth rate in client numbers of around 5%.

The Australian Government has undertaken a national review of community care programs that examined issues of eligibility, consistency, overlaps and gaps in service delivery. The CAAS scheme was included in the national review undertaken.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission had granted a temporary exemption for CAAS in response to an application made by the Hon. Santo Santoro, the Minister for Ageing, 28 April 2006. The application sought a 12 month extension to the previous temporary exemption granted to the Department with effect from 21 July 2005 to 30 June 2006.

The temporary exemption is granted subject to the condition that the Department advise the Commission of the following:

- The status of the work being undertaken by the Department, including the outcome of consultations with the States and Territories, in order to address the age related restrictions currently in place in the Scheme; and
- The changes the Department proposes to make to the age related restrictions before the expiration of the temporary exemption on 30 June 2007.

The CFA was concerned that the situation regarding age restrictions continued in the administration of the CAAS despite the operation of the Age Discrimination Act (ADA) since 2004 with a significant number of people affected.

These concerns were partly addressed in the May 2007 Federal Budget with the Government announcing changes to CAAS as part of their commitment to this growing continence issue of cost of product. The Australian Government committed an additional \$98.5 million in new funding over four years to accommodate these changes, which is predicted to benefit an additional 54,000 Australians living with incontinence.

The changes to CAAS, announced in the May budget, effective from 1 July 2007, will significantly broaden eligibility, which will now include people aged 5 to 15 years and 65 and over. Additionally, people who hold a Pensioner Concession Card and who have a non-neurological cause for their incontinence, such as autism, cancer, prostate disease or dementia will also be able to access CAAS from 1 July 2007.

Whilst the CFA commends Federal Budget announcement for funding to redress the age restrictions imposed in the administration of the CAAS to meet the extra cost of servicing the needs of the estimated additional recipients eligible the CAAS subsidy scheme still discriminates against Australians included in the estimated 3.8m Australians with some form of incontinence who do not hold a Pensioner Concession Card. This group along with stoma patients with urinary incontinence do not have access to subsidies under CAAS for continence management products to improve their quality of life, participation in society and who daily face the burden of managing the personal cost of incontinence.

The attached position paper outlines the advantages of better managing the continence subsidy schemes managed at the Federal and state levels in Australia to ensure efficiency and savings to all through a possible restructure and management review. Incontinence along with the lack of a carer is one of the three major causes for admission into residential care.

Sincerely,

Barry Cahill
Chief Executive Officer

Encl: CFA's Position Paper Managing Continence: Supported Access to Continence Management Products (November 2006)

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