**Position Statement by Errol Ingram**

Published on Blind Focus Pty Ltd Facebook page 25 June 2022

Normally I focus on what is happening with clients in Tasmania in my weekly Facebook posts. However, this week I wanted to bring a serious issue to your attention. I’ll do my best to keep the post as short as possible, but I feel I need to raise this issue for professional and personal reasons, so it will be a longer post than usual.

Please note, that as I write this, I wear two hats: my Blind Focus O&M Specialist hat and my Orientation and Mobility Association of Australasia [OMAA] - National Standards Committee member hat.

OMAA’s position on the O&M profession and O&M services is unequivocal. That is, O&M Specialists are the only allied health professionals with the professional competencies to assess and instruct people who are blind or have low vision, in the comprehensive skill set needed, to travel safely, effectively, and independently.

The Issue:

Last Wednesday 22 June, the NDIS Pricing Arrangements and Price Limits 2022 – 23 was published. The issue of concern is that NDIS has decided to ‘convert’ the item support code O&M Specialists have been using to claim O&M services delivered to NDIS Participants, to what the NDIS calls ‘a Legacy Support’. This is what the NDIS Pricing Arrangement documents says about ‘Legacy Supports’:

"The NDIA sometimes deactivates support items. Deactivated support items cannot be used. Before a support is deactivated it is converted into a Legacy Support for a period of time. These legacy supports are listed in a separate tab of the Support Catalogue for the information of providers and participants. Providers and participants should not create new service bookings for legacy supports. In general, claims for legacy supports should only continue to be made against a service booking if that service booking was in existence at the time the support was turned into a legacy support". [p.8]

The change will take affect this coming Friday 1 July and, as far as I know, a date has not been set [or at least communicated] for ‘deactivation’. This means that NDIS Participants who are blind or vision [including families of children who are blind or vison impaired], will now face an uncertain future as to whether O&M service delivery remains viable.

Background:

For the past several years, the OMAA has been negotiating with the NDIA and then the NDIS Commission, to recognise O&M as a profession, so that individual O&M Specialists can register with the NDIS. To be blunt, this has been a slow and painful process, involving a great deal of time, effort, and frustration.

It would be easy to conclude from our experience over the past few years that there is no formal and/or transparent process for the NDIA and Commission to recognise professions. However, this must not be the case because, every so often a profession IS recognised and added to the list of Disability-Related Health Supports, which includes Art Therapy, Dietitian, Music Therapy and so on.

In good faith, the OMAA has worked closely with the NDIS Commission over the past years, to satisfy their requirements for recognition of O&M as a Disability Related Health Support. In March this year, OMAA was advised that the NDIS Commission could not make a final decision on our request for recognition because the NDIA has to consider our request in relation to pricing, qualification standards and so on. Having not heard back from NDIA or the Commission, a meeting was held with the Registrar of the Commission in mid-May this year.

It was made clear at the meeting, that a decision had not been made about OMAA’s request, but no major change in the current arrangements was flagged by the Registrar. However, just over a month after that meeting, the item code that O&M Specialists have been using for years, has been converted into a legacy support, which is the process step before being ‘deactivated’.

I should also mention that the pricing arrangements published on Wednesday, comes one week after the Hon Bill Shorten MP, Australian Government Minister for the NDIS and Minister for Government Services met with the Australian Government Minister for Social Services, and State/Territory Ministers for Disabilities. At that meeting, all Ministers committed to a range of NDIS improvements including: building transparency, trust and action; having an early review of the NDIS, building a stronger workforce and service provider market and so on.

Given the amount of consultation OMAA has had with the NDIS Commission over the past years, OMAA has a right, I believe, to feel blindsided by the changes in the Pricing Arrangements published last Wednesday.

A Call to Action:

As you can imagine, since Wednesday, OMAA has received numerous calls, from not only concerned O&M Specialists about the future and viability of O&M in Australia but also our clients, and families of children who are blind or vison impaired. O&M Specialists, and I would add Australians who are blind or vison impaired and their families, are right to be anxious and alarmed about the events of this week. This pre-emptive action by NDIS to ‘legacy’ the support item used to claim for O&M Services, in order to deactivate it, with no communication, no timeframe, and only 10 days’ notice, does not engender any sense of trust or transparency, which the Hon. Bill Shorten has promised.

In response, OMAA documented our concerns in writing to the NDIS Commission yesterday. In that email we requested, as a matter of urgency, clarification of whether we can still use the ‘Legacy Support’ code after 1 July [next Friday] and if so, for how long? And if not, what code should O&M Specialists use?

We also reconfirmed our commitment to the provision of O&M services to NDIS Participants who are blind or vision impaired, so they are able to build capacity, to participate in their communities and live their daily lives, safely and independently.

In addition, our valued partners in O&M service delivery have sent urgent letters of concern to the Hon Bill Shorten, Vision 2020, and the NDIA. No doubt this will only be the beginning of taking the necessary action to have O&M recognised as a profession in the NDIS. For its part, OMAA will continue to advocate for the inclusion of O&M on the same level as Music and Art therapy and so on.

Over the next few weeks, OMAA will be communicating with anyone and everyone who values O&M as a service and profession, to enlist their support and to ensure the continued provision of O&M to people who are blind or vision impaired in Australia. OMAA will need the support of all sectors of the community to make sure that Australians who are blind or vision impaired continue to receive O&M services in the future. Thanks for reading this, I’ll keep you updated. [#NDIS](https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/ndis?__eep__=6&__cft__%5b0%5d=AZUOF_ibTafgw4sTO0aUf61NwULJ7CrowmCJMR4hd5gdNfvPov2WHc4TKOD_OyVf_r9iBAoTJa0WJpYaW0AWkvA5NGHJCZqPwT3w_X8Af-VWM0B45qSe2gxwf7Z157XuTsMVHsVRcuCIZPddDlLMgPSMs902gaxPn1eiMUIqQA2DNg&__tn__=*NK-R) [#blindness](https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/blindness?__eep__=6&__cft__%5b0%5d=AZUOF_ibTafgw4sTO0aUf61NwULJ7CrowmCJMR4hd5gdNfvPov2WHc4TKOD_OyVf_r9iBAoTJa0WJpYaW0AWkvA5NGHJCZqPwT3w_X8Af-VWM0B45qSe2gxwf7Z157XuTsMVHsVRcuCIZPddDlLMgPSMs902gaxPn1eiMUIqQA2DNg&__tn__=*NK-R) [#visionimpaired](https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/visionimpaired?__eep__=6&__cft__%5b0%5d=AZUOF_ibTafgw4sTO0aUf61NwULJ7CrowmCJMR4hd5gdNfvPov2WHc4TKOD_OyVf_r9iBAoTJa0WJpYaW0AWkvA5NGHJCZqPwT3w_X8Af-VWM0B45qSe2gxwf7Z157XuTsMVHsVRcuCIZPddDlLMgPSMs902gaxPn1eiMUIqQA2DNg&__tn__=*NK-R) [#OrientationAndMobility](https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/orientationandmobility?__eep__=6&__cft__%5b0%5d=AZUOF_ibTafgw4sTO0aUf61NwULJ7CrowmCJMR4hd5gdNfvPov2WHc4TKOD_OyVf_r9iBAoTJa0WJpYaW0AWkvA5NGHJCZqPwT3w_X8Af-VWM0B45qSe2gxwf7Z157XuTsMVHsVRcuCIZPddDlLMgPSMs902gaxPn1eiMUIqQA2DNg&__tn__=*NK-R)