



Autism Tasmania Inc. AGM September 28 2008

President's Report

Autism Tasmania has grown over the last 16 years from a group of concerned parents to an organization with 200 members throughout the State. In September 2008 Autism Tasmania is on the brink of evolving from a small volunteer organisation, to a commercially viable service provider supported by federal and state governments which could offer information, support, advocacy and training to people with autism, their families, carers, and to organisations which work in this field.

The Federal Government's \$197m *Helping Children with Autism* project announced in October last year showed that there is now national recognition of the impact of Autism Spectrum Disorder on children, their families and carers.

In late November 2007, Autism Tasmania was identified by the Federal Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) as a key autism organisation which provides support and information for families and carers of children with autism. It was invited to make a submission for a one-off \$50 000 grant to assist with the provision of services in the interim period. The purpose of the grant was very specifically to assist Autism Tasmania to build its capacity to link families and carers to existing services and resources, to provide information and advice about ASD to families and carers, and to provide referrals to the appropriate early intervention services.

The submission was successful, and funding was confirmed in March with the requirement that the funds be spent by 30 June. The committee asked Mark Ward, a past president and experienced project manager to manage this project and we are very grateful indeed for his skills, patience and knowledge. Elements of the project include increasing the capacity of the Family Service coordinator throughout the state, development of a well functioning website, development of hard copy brochures and information for marketing, and purchase of improved office equipment and library books. The project also includes a professionally developed survey about the autism population in Tasmania by an independent researcher with approval from the Tasmanian Human Research Ethics Committee.

I must emphasise that there were specific guidelines from FaHCSIA about how this money could be spent by Autism Tasmania. The feedback from FaHCSIA has been very positive, and has endorsed the manner in which the project has been implemented.

As the *Helping Children with Autism* project is being unrolled nationally, Autism Tasmania has the opportunity to be involved at the highest level. Rose Clark has been asked to be part of the Australian Autism Education and Training Consortium, and will be therefore involved in early stages of the development of workshops and information sessions for parents and carers of children with ASD.

In the last few months members of the committee have been working with FaHCSIA to explore ways in which Autism Tasmania can deliver the Autism Advisory Service, which is part of the *Helping Children with Autism* package. A proposal has been developed and we expect to be notified very soon whether this has been successful.

If successful this initiative will enhance the services that Autism Tasmania currently provides.

Autism Tasmania currently provides a support and information service with 24 hour state-wide telephone and email access, but with a response capacity by the Family Support Coordinator, Rose Clark of two paid days per week.

The range of enquiries to which Rose responds include requests for referral to specific services, basic autism information, first-time conversations about ASD after a child has been diagnosed, medium-level conversations covering specific situations about behaviours, school or family relationships, and other much more complex enquiries that may require research, counselling, working with other agencies and extended follow-up.

Many enquiries are from families and carers, but an increasing number are now coming from government agencies such as Education, or Disability Services, and non-government ones such as day-placement organisations, child-care centres and respite and accommodation services.

It is becoming more difficult to respond adequately to the increasing number of requests for assistance. In March some members of the Executive met the Minister for Education, David Bartlett MHA to brief him about the activities of Autism Tasmania and to discuss the collective experiences that parents and students are having in the education system. He indicated that he is keen to develop an ongoing relationship, at ministerial level, where Autism Tasmania is able contribute to education policy, and to look at practical ways of working together to improve the educational outcome for students who have an Autism Spectrum Disorder. We also discussed the notion that the Department of Education might make a significant financial contribution to assist the ongoing operations of Autism Tasmania.

Members of the committee also met with Bill Shorten MHR, the Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities. We presented him with an overview of the operations of Autism Tasmania, and a summary of the current issues facing the autism community in Tasmania, most notably the difficulty of assessment and diagnosis, and the impact of Asperger Syndrome. He was also particularly interested in the need to address the difficulties faced by people with an ASD at transition periods in their lives. He is keen to continue a dialogue.

Autism Tasmania's response to the Helping Children with Autism initiatives has dominated much of the year's business, and has certainly stretched the organisation's volunteer resources.

Our association with National foods and the selling of Pura Milk at Agfest and the Hobart Show has provided a welcome boost to funds, and we thank Mick Clark and his volunteers. Thanks must go to committee member Carolyn Moore for arranging and coordinating the Hit Autism for Six!! Raffle of a cricket bat signed and donated by the Tassie Tigers.

In October last year the committee formally adopted the new orchid logo. The new logo has been designed by Brad Allen from Scarab Design. It is visually appealing, specifically Tasmanian, and the notion that "With nurturing it will grow to its full potential" has captured people's imagination.

I am pleased to report that Autism Tasmania has been successful in its submission for two grants this year. We received \$4500 from the Ross Divett Foundation to fund three visits by the Family Support Coordinator over a year to three regional areas of Tasmania. This will be greatly appreciated by support groups in the Huon area, the West Coast, the East Coast and Circular Head. A \$2000 grant from Rio Tinto has enabled an Asperger Support group to be established in Launceston and supported by the Family support Coordinator.

In May this year the Access Arts Link Program in Launceston received the 2008 Alex Walley Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Field of Autism Spectrum Disorders. This program provides opportunities to artistic students with different abilities to work with mentors and other artists in a supportive and friendly environment and to create artwork that is meaningful for them. Many of the artists are creatively gifted students who have Asperger Syndrome. Rachel Cuthbertson is the co-ordinator of this program and accepted the award on behalf of the program.

The Family Support Service was originally set up to support the autism community in its widest sense and Rose Clark has established and extended networks within the Asperger community, parent support groups, community organisations and service providers.

We acknowledge and thank Rose for her work for Autism Tasmania this year. Although officially part-time, Rose is effectively on call 24 hours per day, seven days per week. Earlier this year, when our finances were stretched to the limit she most generously volunteered her time so that the support service could continue to operate.

It is clear that Autism Tasmania is seen by both federal and state governments as a credible and valued organisation with which they wish to collaborate. There is a wonderful opportunity to build on these relationships to develop a secure financial future. I hope that the members will continue to endorse the work of the committee to achieve this outcome which in turn will allow Autism Tasmania to provide the best possible services to the people with Autism Spectrum Disorder who really need them.

Andrew Davies
Acting President