

## **MEDIA RELEASE – September 2020**

### **Telehealth providing Tasmanians with disability allied health services amid COVID limitations**

In a year of uncertainty and disruption, COVID has transformed the way Tasmanians living with disability access allied health services they would have otherwise struggled to get.

Traditionally across Australia, allied health services like occupational therapy and physiotherapy are 50% less available to people in remote and regional areas. (ABS 2016 stat)

As the COVID pandemic spread across the country, concerns abounded as to how these services would be accessed by people with disability in the midst of strict border closures, and social distancing.

The issue of Tasmanians with disability going unsupported by Allied health was identified by Able Australia, a disability service provider, who partnered with Melbourne's Monash University to pilot a program helping to assess and treat patients via telehealth.

The initiative sees graduating allied health students provide telehealth assessments under supervised conditions. This approach allowed students, whose study usually requires face-to-face contact hours, to get their practice hours up while under lockdown through remote learning.

Able Australia CEO Kate MacRae said COVID-19 had unlocked a new way of providing clinical interventions to people with a disability in traditionally less serviced areas.

‘What Able Australia has managed to achieve with Monash University is a completely new way to connect and treat people with disability in remote locations. Access to Allied Health is a fundamental aspect of care that they require to maximise their independence in all areas of their lives.

'The work we have done in Tasmania has proven that allied health interventions can be provided via telehealth, to people with a range of complex disabilities. It is a revolutionary step forward in providing care to people with disability, potentially streamlining and simplifying the process forever.'

'Ultimately, these telehealth assessments can be used by clients in their NDIS planning reviews to secure funding which will lead to better life outcomes,' Ms MacRae said.

COVID has put limitations on all industries, particularly on education and health, but the innovative program developed by Able Australia and Monash University has proven to be a success story in a year where there are so few.

'Building collaborative and innovative partnerships across the University and Disability Support sectors - and delivering new and flexible participation-focused programs that comply with COVID restrictions and build capacity of both NDIS participants and near graduate allied health professional students - is integral to a sustainable NDIS market and effective Scheme outcomes'.

'This NDIS Jobs and Market project has built a collaboration between the Monash School of Primary and Allied Healthcare and Able Australia, and the NDIS participants Able Australia provides services to. The program has delivered mixed digital and face to face models of support for NDIS participants living in Tasmania. It is exciting to see the impacts this program is having on the participation goals and individualised outcomes of people with disability within the NDIS.'

'This programs puts the NDIS participant at the centre of support planning, starting with a conversation about their goals and needs and then working collaboratively with the participant, Monash allied health students and Able Australia staff to deliver targeted supports based on those identified goals.' Said Associate Professor of the Rehabilitation, Ageing and Independent Living (RAIL) Research Centre at Monash University, Libby Callaway.

According to Able Australia's Tasmanian Manager, Bill Iverach, the pilot program has the potential to translate into great client outcomes. 'Six of the clients who took part in the allied health assessments received comprehensive reports which they will now use at their next NDIS review to secure even greater supports.

We've seen one client ask to double the supports they receive on the back of this assessment. This client currently only receives funding for 2 support workers, 3 hours a day, 5 days a week to get out of the house and access the community. For the other 21 hours of the day, the client is largely bed-ridden. They hope to secure 6 hours of support each day going forward.

For those of us who can choose when they get out and about, it is difficult to understand how isolating some disabilities can be. By doubling their support package, the life outcomes for this client in terms of physical wellbeing and mental wellbeing are almost immeasurable.

The value of the allied health assessments cannot be overstated.'

Ms MacRae hopes the initiative will inspire other universities to consider using telehealth as a way to educate students and treat those with disability all over the country meaning nobody is limited by location anymore.

'In the next five years there will be around 90,000 jobs created in the disability sector. Partnerships, like the one Able Australia has forged with Monash University, mean we're growing our next generation of allied health professionals while delivering important services to people with disability – no matter where they live," said Ms MacRae

**ENDS**

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### About Able Australia

Able Australia is a leading provider of disability services for adults and community supports for seniors. Established over 50 years ago to provide support to the deafblind community, we are now a diverse not-for-profit organisation offering a broad range of high quality services. We currently provide support in Melbourne, Tasmania, ACT and SE Queensland. For more information about Able Australia go to [www.ableaustralia.org.au](http://www.ableaustralia.org.au)