

28 February 2010

Mr Roger Law
Secretary
Action for Tasmanian Autistic Children (ATAC)

E-mail: atactas@gmail.com

Dear Mr Law

Thank you for your email of 21 December seeking a response to a series of questions on behalf of the Management Committee of ATAC.

I have pleasure in responding on behalf of all Liberal Members and candidates.

1. Will you introduce screening for autism in Tasmania for children at ages 18 months and 2 years?

Yes. The Liberal's policy commits to introducing early screening for autism at 18 months and two years of age. This will be performed by child health nurses, GPs and paediatricians who will be trained in the use of simple, easy to use but effective early screening tools that provide a checklist for autism in toddlers and are in use worldwide. The screening tool will also provide the modelling and demographic data needed for the development of early intensive treatment services across the State.

2. Will your government establish Autism Clinics in the four major hospitals in Tasmania when those who are red flagged by the screening process can be directed for full diagnosis not only of autism, but of the many co-morbidities associated with autism, to ensure that a holistic treatment plan that also covers such co-morbidities as well as for autism can be drawn up for each child?

The Liberals commit to establishing a diagnostic panel for those red-flagged by the early screening tool, so that those children can undergo full diagnosis.

The panel will be required to use world best practice principles, including test for co-morbidities. We acknowledge that some of this testing will be required at the hospital level. The panel will be required to draw up individual treatment programs specific to the child. The panel will be made up of a psychologist, speech therapist and a paediatrician with experience in autism. The panel must agree upon the diagnosis before the child is referred to the Early Intensive Treatment Centre in Hobart.

3. Will your government build early intervention centres in all regions of Tasmania with the capacity for outreach services so that all autistic children will be catered for?

Yes, the Liberal policy will establish Early Intensive Treatment Centres for autism across the State. The first centre will be established in southern Tasmania. This Centre will include intensive treatment for children, who will have access to psychologists and speech therapists, although the majority of treatment will be undertaken by trained behavioural therapists.

The Centre will not be a day centre or child-minding exercise. It is based on the evidence-based premise that intensive early intervention and treatment is needed before the child commences school, so is able to cope in a school environment.

All children will have individually tailored programs of approximately 20-30 hours of intensive behavioural intervention a week.

The Centre will also provide rehabilitation and treatment for children who are not currently coping in the existing schools system, as well as providing professional development and learning opportunities for parents (families will be an integral part of this model), teachers and teacher aides. The Centre will also be accessible to the University of Tasmania for graduate teachers, psychologists and allied health and other health professionals, as well as child health nurses and speech therapists.

The Centre will be used to support the child in his/her transition to primary school but will also be used for transition through major life changes when regressive behaviours can occur. Withdrawal areas will be provided in all primary schools and staff from the Centre will provide assistance to schools when needed. This will allow for continuity for the child and his/her individually tailored program. The Centre will provide outreach, where possible, to children, families and schools throughout southern Tasmania.

Centres will be established in the North and North-West as well, with an additional centre in the south in subsequent years.

4. Will you introduce remedial programs for school children who have missed out on early intervention?

The Liberals have committed to extending and expanding the successful A-team program, which currently operates in the north of the State. This program works with primary and high school children with autism, who have either dropped out of school, or who only have access to distance education, or are struggling to cope with the noisy and ever-changing environment of most busy schools. The program helps schools and teachers to better understand autism, and helps the student by arranging the school environment and systems to help some of these children get back to school.

5. Will your government provide special programmes for adult autistics to remedy the shocking employment prospects for them?

We are re searching the inquiry by the British Parliament into this area and will review their proposals to see if they are appropriate for us to adopt.

6. Are there any other initiatives that your government plans to introduce for people with autism?

We will constantly monitor world's best practice in this area. When evidence-based research proves new initiatives work we will consider them for Tasmania.

7. Could you provide a timetable for implementation of your proposals for people with autism?

The timeline is –

- In the 2010-11 financial year, screening and diagnosis will be established, training for behavioural therapists will begin.
- On 1 January 2011, the first Autism Centre in the south of the State operational
- 1 January 2012, the second Autism Centre in the north of the State operational;
- Day one of a Hodgman Liberal Government - A-team operational in north;
- From 2010-11, the A-team extended to other areas of the State.

We would expect to announce more policies during the campaign, and these can be found at www.tasliberal.com.au or by phoning our offices.

Yours sincerely

Will Hodgman MP
Leader of the Opposition