An interview with Eddie Bartnik

We are delighted to share a recent interview with Eddie Bartnik, Strategic Adviser to the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA). In the interview, Mr Bartnik addresses mental health and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Can you tell us about your background and your role at the NDIA?

In April 2014, I joined the Agency as Strategic Adviser leading work around mental health/psychosocial disability, Local Area Coordination and Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (previously called Tier 2 of the NDIS.)

I established and chair the NDIA National Mental Health Sector Reference Group, which is made up of people with a lived experience, carers, peak bodies and key government agencies. So far, the group has advised the NDIA on good practice for sector engagement, language use, access to the Scheme and support design for people with a psychosocial disability.

Prior to joining the Agency, I held a three-and-a-half year term as Western Australia’s first Mental Health Commissioner where I led mental health reform including the establishment of the Commission, development of the “Mental Health 2020” strategic policy and new mental health legislation. I oversaw the Commissioning of public, private and community sector mental health services to over 48,000 people with a budget in excess of $650 million.

I’ve also worked as Acting Director General of the Department for Communities in WA, following a long career as a Director with the Disability Services Commission. I led the establishment and implementation of the state-wide Local Area Coordination program in Western Australia and then nationally and internationally.

I’ve worked extensively and published across Australia and overseas in areas of human services reform and individualised funding and personalised support, with 25 years’ experience. I’ve worked at state and national level in disability and mental health policy development, services planning and implementation.

There are some challenges for the NDIS in meeting the needs of people with mental illness. One challenge is the tension between the concept of permanent impairment within the NDIS, and the language of recovery that is the basis of current best practice in mental health. How is the NDIA addressing this tension?

Mental illness is complex in its own right and its incorporation into the Scheme will be challenging because permanent, or likely to be permanent, impairment is central to the NDIS. This does not sit easily within the
framework and language of recovery, which is the basis of current mental health best practice, so there is a great deal of work to be done.

The NDIA is developing a deeper understanding of mental health recovery and a contributing life in the community, informed by individual strengths, preferences, needs and choices. This extends to areas of life such as employment and community participation and it aligns closely with the NDIS focus on choice, control and capacity building for participants, including people with psychosocial disability.

The Agency is working closely with the sector on the review of access for people with psychosocial disability, where the language and narrative around psychosocial disability is being reviewed to make it more appropriate and engaging. It is also important to be clear that the requirement incorporates the words “or likely to be permanent” which is sometimes not clearly communicated to people in documentation and processes.

The NDIA is reporting every quarter to the Council of Australian Government (COAG). What does the latest quarterly report tell us about people with psychosocial disability who are part of the NDIS trial?

The Quarterly report shows good progress in people with psychosocial disability accessing the Scheme, despite the relatively recent community understanding of this as a form of disability, and psychosocial disability being late in phasing for some of the trial sites. As of 31 December 2014 there were 906 participants with a primary mental illness and 438 participants with a secondary mental illness.

More than 1500 NDIS participants have now identified as having a psychosocial disability and are already in the scheme. The Agency will use their feedback to inform and build the NDIS as it moves towards full scheme rollout.

Within their individual experiences, we’ve also witnessed some great examples of people who were homeless or stuck in temporary accommodation but with the help of NDIS staff, they have been able to complete their plan and begin living in their own home with all the necessary supports to help them improve their health, wellbeing and valued roles within the community.

What are the eligibility requirements for the NDIS and how do they apply to people with mental illness?

A psychosocial disability is one where people experience impairments related to mental health issues. Sometimes a psychosocial disability is long standing and likely to be permanent with significant functional impacts that reduce opportunities to participate in life activities without appropriate supports in place.

For those Australians with a psychosocial disability who meet the NDIS access requirements, the full rollout of the NDIS, from 2016, will provide a great opportunity to receive reasonable and necessary psychosocial disability supports right across Australia.

A person is able to access the Scheme if they meet the disability or early intervention requirements – an impairment that is permanent or likely to be permanent. The impairment results in substantially reduced functional capacity for a person, in areas such as communication, social interaction, learning, mobility, self-care and management.

The disability also affects a person’s capacity for social or economic participation and a person is likely to require supports for the rest of their life from the NDIS. Or a person may access the scheme under the early intervention requirements, where early intervention supports will alleviate the impacts of a person’s impairment.

In addition, a person needs to be aged under 65 when the access request was made. They also need to be an Australian citizen or the holder of a permanent visa or a special category visa holder. Until the Scheme is fully rolled out nationally, a person needs to be living within a trial site at the time when they make their access request.
Part of the NDIS disability support system will be a range of supports available for people with disability, their families and carers under the title of information, linkages and capacity building. What kind of services and support will be available to people with a mental illness, their families and their carers under this framework?

Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) is a key component of the NDIS insurance model and will contribute to the sustainability of the NDIS by building the capacity of the community, people with disability, their families and carers, and greater community inclusion. Over time, these supports will not only lead to improved outcomes for people but they can also reduce the demand for specialist disability support. The policy framework is in the final stages of development and is currently being agreed by governments following targeted consultations by jurisdictions early this year.

ILC supports will be delivered through five streams, which can often be connected — information, linkages and referrals, capacity building for mainstream services, community awareness and capacity building, individual capacity building and Local Area Coordination.

It is important to remember the NDIS is only responsible for supports which enable people with psychosocial disability to participate in every-day life so they can enjoy greater social inclusion and economic participation. The NDIS is in addition to the treatment provided through the specialist mental health system and all mainstream services.

What options are available for people with psychosocial disability who would qualify for an individually funded package under the NDIS but choose not to participate in the scheme?

People do not have to participate in the Scheme.

It is important to the NDIA that people are confident in their decision making and we are investigating the options to make sure there is suitable engagement and outreach where appropriate, to support informed decision making.

In addition to the existing mental health system, other options of support include informal arrangements that are part and parcel of family life or connections with friends and community services—as well as other mainstream supports, such as health and education.

People will be able to access supports under the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building streams through an easier process without the same eligibility requirements as becoming a participant in the Scheme.

What kind of supports can a person with psychosocial disability expect to receive if they are eligible for an individually funded package?

Already we are seeing Australians with disability and their families, living more independent lives, engaging with their community, enrolling in education, entering the workforce for the first time or returning to work and receiving the supports and equipment they need.

This can include assistance with planning, decision making and household tasks, assistance to live independently and achieve their goals, such as building social relationships, as well as financial management and tenancy management skills. Supports may also include community activities such as recreation, education, training and employment.

The types of supports that the NDIS may fund include support for daily personal activities and community participation, transport to be involved in their community, workplace help to allow a participant to successfully manage or keep employment, therapeutic supports including behaviour support and help with household tasks to allow the participant to maintain their home environment.

The NDIA funds reasonable and necessary supports that help a participant to reach their goals and aspirations and to support a participant’s social and economic participation.
Can you talk about the challenges in the trial sites for getting the right supports for people who have psychosocial disability?

The NDIS facilitates planning with participants in the scheme, including people with psychosocial disability. The planning process looks at the person’s goals and aspirations, their available informal, community and mainstream supports as well as any reasonable and necessary funded support that may be needed to achieve those goals.

Every person is unique so we strive to be the best support for a person to achieve and contribute to their community. This includes determining how an individual’s NDIS support will interact with and complement clinical and community mental health services.

The NDIA is currently undertaking a joint project with Mental Health Australia to explore the optimal design of individually funded supports for psychosocial disability. This project will provide recommendations to the NDIA about the best possible range of supports for people with psychosocial disability.

The Scheme through the Sector Development Fund is also working with providers to equip them to provide a wider range of supports and choices for people who will now be able with their individualised funding to choose the supports and providers they wish rather than fitting into existing programs.

Can you explain how carers and families of people with a psychosocial disability can be included in the planning process for an individually funded support plan? How will carers of people with mental illness benefit from the implementation of the NDIS?

Participants can invite other people who are important in their life to help or support them during their planning conversation. This could include family, friends, carer(s) or other people who are important to the person. Alternatively, the NDIA can arrange an independent advocate to attend. These planning discussions can take place at a location that suits the participant and their support network.

Participants in the scheme will have an individualised plan that is tailored to their goals, personal circumstances and disability support needs. The type of supports the NDIA fund may include a support worker so that a carer can return to work or other activities which may improve their lives.

The NDIA offers pre-planning workshops for participants, their families and carers to prepare for their planning meeting. These planning meetings are focused on the future and help participants imagine how they want to live their lives. NDIA planners encourage discussion around personal goals and aspirations, no matter how big or small. Pre-planning workshops explore potential goals and life changes a participant may wish to make. The workshops also provide vital practical information about the process of Scheme access and planning. For those who need a higher level of support during this process, the NDIA can provide one to one support to participants, their families and carers.

The NDIA understands that families, carers and other significant people in a person’s life play an important role in helping participants implement their plans. Participant’s plans include informal supports and seek to safeguard the important role they play in helping participants achieve their goals. Participant’s plans also include community, mainstream supports and any funded supports that are required.

Carers and family members can also talk to the NDIA about any of their own goals or needs that could impact on their capacity to support participants. Funded supports can be provided to help sustain and build the capacity of carers.

The NDIA actively encourages peer support by funding peer support organisations in several states through its Sector Development Funding. Peer Support is a crucial avenue for families to share their experiences and success stories as well as what worked and didn’t work for them.

Carers who are caring for people with psychosocial disability who are not in the trial site are concerned about the changes that will occur as a result of the NDIS rollout. Can you tell them about what they can expect? How will the existing mental health service sector change as the NDIS is rolled out across Australia? Will there still be community mental health services available?
The mental health sector is also currently undergoing reform with its own changes.

The NDIS provides a new opportunity for people with psychosocial disability who meet the access criteria to receive the disability supports they need and have so often missed out on. Participants in the Scheme will need to continue to access other mainstream services, including the clinical and community mental health systems.

The NDIA intends to develop mental health strategies and models of support but mainstream health and mental health services remain very much a part of each state and territory’s health and mental health systems and the NDIS was not in any way designed to replace them.

What changes do you see need to occur in mainstream services so they can be more inclusive of people with mental illness?

Strengthening mainstream supports for people with disabilities is a key component of the NDIS. The NDIA aims to ensure that people with disabilities are able to access supports and services that all people in the community are able to. Collaboration and cooperation between mainstream support services and the NDIS will ensure the best outcomes for people with disability.

The Agency works with mainstream support services referring people with a disability to these services, where these services are the most appropriate support providers. The Agency will also assist mainstream support services to become more inclusive and supportive of people with disability in a range of ways, including providing funding for additional supports to increase an individual’s capacity where required and assisting with ‘warm referrals’ where needed to connect people with disabilities to supports and services they need.

The NDIS will not fund problems and shortfalls in mainstream services by providing substitute services but will work with services to increase their capacity to provide supports to people with disability through education and skill development that will enable services to become inclusive and supportive of people with disability.

What is your advice for carers of people with mental illness? How can carers best prepare for the changes ahead?

The NDIA knows that families and carers are key partners in the support of people with psychosocial disability. Your love and commitment, help and support is of immense importance in the lives of your family members and people you care for and about. We encourage you to attend information sessions about the NDIS and keep up to date by visiting www.ndis.gov.au.

The NDIA will ensure that people with psychosocial disability are given every opportunity to make their own decisions and exercise choice and control. We recognise that the role of families and carers is often essential in supporting people with disability to realise these goals and, with permission of the participant, will include them in discussions about supports. Families and carers are encouraged to attend and assist with the initial stages of planning to have conversations about a participant’s goals and aspirations.