

President's update – February 2019



Sleep is the third pillar of good health, together with a healthy diet and moderate exercise. This is the message that the ASA, SHF and other stakeholders have been driving home to our political leaders. This message, along with presentation of robust data highlighting the magnitude of health issues related to poor sleep and sleep disorders, and the marked individual, economic and social benefits associated with their effective treatment, has convinced the Federal Government to call a National Parliamentary Inquiry into Sleep Health Awareness. Over 120 submissions have been received and public hearings are planned around the

country for January and February next year. Submissions and the Inquiry's terms of reference can be viewed at

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Health_Aged_Care_and_Sport/SleepHealthAwareness/Submissions . The Inquiry is part of a broader long term strategy of the ASA and SHF to bring the importance of sleep to the forefront of the Australian community, healthcare providers, be they public or private, and to the Government and its administrative branches.

According to the Federal Government, the MBS Review Taskforce occurred in order to update all item numbers, in line with the practice of modern medicine. Sleep study items, as part of the Thoracic Medicine Clinical Committee process, were one of the first areas to go under the microscope because of the huge growth in billing for sleep item numbers. The ASA did not initiate this process but worked very hard to protect sleep physicians' autonomy and discretion in deciding on the most appropriate test and management to ensure best outcomes for their patients. Throughout the MBS review and planned implementation of the new item numbers, the ASA continued to express concern that patient access may be affected by the changes and was able to have a substantial influence on the eventual recommendations to the Taskforce. The ASA was also able to expedite the approval of new item numbers for vigilance testing, which ensured that sleep physicians still had access to this important test when the November 1, 2018 schedule came out. The ASA continues to actively work with the Department of Health, advocating for best patient care and outcomes.

The new Private Health Insurance reforms - with laboratory-based sleep studies potentially requiring gold tier status - will make vigilance testing inaccessible for many patients in need of them. Further, in-lab sleep studies will become inaccessible to many patients who would have previously had their tests in private sleep facilities. These changes will have a negative effect on the private sleep health industry and result in an increased burden on public sleep services, neither of which are desirable. You will be aware that the ASA was 'blindsided' by this decision. Despite this, the Association is working hard towards trying to change these reforms, has recently met with senior advisors to the Federal Health Minister about this issue and will continue to advocate that these recommendations be reversed, in liaison with both sides of politics. At the same time the ASA is liaising with PHI companies to try and ensure that, even though it is not mandated, they keep sleep studies on all levels of cover.

The Professional Service Review (PSR) process plays a role in ensuring that both Medicare and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme deliver quality, cost-effective health services and pharmaceuticals to the Australian community. The PSR utilises a peer review process and relies on the support of health practitioners and their representative registration bodies to perform its statutory function. Several ASA members have raised concerns about aspects of this process. As a result the ASA has initiated

communications with the PSR to better understand their review processes and has offered to provide expert advice to facilitate what should be an accurate, contemporary and transparent process.

Public health services provide a large amount of sleep medical care to the community – but often have unacceptably long waiting lists. A challenge to Directors of Public sleep laboratories is their inability to easily or quickly expand their services due to severe budgetary constraints. To expand public health services many things are needed which are unfortunately beyond the capacity of the ASA to influence *e.g.* space, equipment and ongoing funding support from the hospital and the multiple levels of approval required.

The ASA is primarily a volunteer organisation, without the current ability to mount large-scale campaigns on behalf of the disparate areas of sleep medicine in Australia. However the ASA continues to be supportive and active in trying to ensure state based access to sleep testing. For example, the ASA has recently provided strong support for a sleep laboratory to be constructed in the new Royal Adelaide Hospital facilities. The ASA has also written letters of support for members across the country with regard to a number of confidential issues they have faced and it continues to advocate for better access to sleep services nationally, including for patients in rural and remote areas. The ASA will continue to make statements in support of increased access and expansion of services, in an active and persistent fashion. Again, through the Parliamentary Sleep Health Awareness Inquiry, the ASA is working to raise the level of understanding of the importance of good sleep and actively promoting solutions to some of these issues. This will shine a spotlight on areas of need, to ensure access and equity in the provision of sleep medicine services.

I am sure that you will all agree that the recent Annual Scientific Meeting (Sleep Down Under) held in Brisbane was a huge success, with a record number of presentations and strong input from international guests. Andrew Gikas is already working hard on next year's meeting, which will be held in Sydney from 16-19 October. Please note that we will be back in Brisbane in 2020 for the Sleep Down Under conference (22-24 October), which will be held jointly with the International Paediatric Sleep Association. It's never too early to pencil both of these events into your calendars! Please also note that there will strong Australian content in next year's World Sleep conference to be held 20-25 September 2019 in Vancouver, as many Australians have been invited to attend as keynote speakers.

Sleep in Aotearoa (SiA) will be held in Christchurch from May 2-4, 2019. The ASA Board will attend this meeting, supported by an unrestricted grant from Fisher & Paykel. As well as holding a face-to-face board meeting, members of the board will be invited to participate in the meeting as speakers. I am also pleased to announce that a Memorandum of Understanding has been created to formalise the collegial and supportive partnership that will exist between the Sleep Health Foundation of New Zealand (SHFNZ), the SHF and the ASA. The Mission of the SHFNZ is 'to promote sleep health across the lifespan', and its Visions are to (1) be the leading national advocate for Sleep Health in New Zealand and (2) have a New Zealand community that recognises and values the importance of good sleep health as a route to personal wellbeing, safety, productivity, and quality of life.

A new industry-sponsored research grant will be added to the ASA Awards portfolio – more information on this will be provided early in the new year- and 2019 will also see the development and institution of a new and improved website for the ASA.

I would like to acknowledge the enormous contribution of Matt Naughton to our field as he is retiring as "respiratory" editor of the Internal Medicine Journal, a position he has held for the past 18 years. During this time Matt reviewed respiratory papers and an increasing number of sleep papers. In Matt's words, *"this journal provides a great opportunity to get "sleep" papers into the*

*scientific field. The journal is really set up to accept papers that just “fall between the cracks” of the big players and the journal looks favourably on articles that involve junior clinicians trying to get a start in the academic field”. The ASA would like to congratulate Nigel McArdle for his recent appointment to the *Internal Medical Journal* as its Sleep Medicine Editor.*

Peter Eastwood
President, ASA