**TRANSCRIPT**

Reasonable and Necessary with Dr George: Making Sense of the NDIS podcast

**Series 4 – Staying safe during COVID-19**

**EPISODE 4: 17 APRIL 2020**

Q: Hi listeners and welcome to our Coronavirus series of Reasonable and Necessary.

I’m your host, Dr George Taleporos and I’m from the Summer Foundation.

We all have a role to play in getting through this pandemic, wash your hands, don’t touch your face, stay at home. These are things that we all need to do.

On top of that, we need to work out how to get the support that we need in a way that is safe.

We don’t have all the answers, but we are here to help you through it.

Please remember that we can’t provide medical advice, talk to your doctor for that or call the National Coronavirus info line on 1800 020 080 or visit health.gov.au

On today’s episode, I’m joined by Kirsten Deane, Campaign Director at Every Australian Counts. We’ll have all the latest info about how the NDIS is changing to help us through the Coronavirus. You’ll learn about how you can use your funding more flexibly, how your plan will be reviewed and lots more.

Q: Hey Kirsten, thanks for joining us.

A: Hi George, it’s always lovely to talk to you.

Q: Absolutely, now there have been lots of changes with the NDIS everyone wants to know about, can you take us through some of the changes that have come in as a result of Coronavirus?

A: Sure, and I think it’s great that the NDIA have made lots of changes in the last few weeks, but there are probably still a few more that they need to make, so maybe we’ll talk about that in a little while. But in terms of the changes that they have made, probably the ones that affect most people is the first and most important change is that NDIS plans don’t end any more. So you probably remember that earlier in the year, the NDIA introduced a change that if your plan was due to end and you didn’t yet have a new one, they kept extending your plan by 28 days until your new plan actually landed. Well, what they’ve done now is not just extend it by 28 days, but a whole 365 days, like a whole year and basically, on the day that your plan is due to end and if you don’t have a new one, the NDIA will automatically basically do a cut and paste and give you another whole year of the same plan. So your goals will be the same and your supports would be the same and your budget would be the same, and they’ve done that so that nobody has a gap between plans and runs out of money at this really critical juncture, so that’s a really good change because it means that worry that maybe I have a gap between plans and I won’t have any support, that won’t happen now. Your plan will just roll over, you’ll get another plan for exactly the same amount and you know that you won’t run out of funds.

Q: That’s good, and informative and very helpful, but what if you do need a new plan and what if your old plan isn’t enough?

A: Yeah, so what the NDIA have said is obviously at the moment, they are trying to limit the number of face-to-face planning meetings that they have, so what they’re basically doing is planning meetings over the phone. Now they have said, now I know that doesn’t work for everybody, and some people really do need to have a planning meeting face-to-face, so they have said that they can do some, if that’s you and that’s your circumstances and you really need to do it face-to-face, then they can do that, but for everybody else, they reckon that it’s best to just do it over the phone.

Q: I want to say something personal on that. I did an over the phone planning meeting and I found it so much better than the one that was face-to-face because I could be in front of my computer, I had all my documents there, I could refer to things, I could use my calculator, I felt so amazing by being in front of my computer, I found the phone planning review a lot easier and I know that that’s not the case for everyone, but for me, it worked quite well.

A: Yeah, and I’m hoping that some of these changes that they’ve introduced just for this particular period actually hang around, because a lot of the changes that they’ve made in the last little while are about being more flexible and giving people more choice and isn’t that what we’ve all been banging on about for the last few years to try and make the NDIS less bureaucratic, more flexible, give people more choice. So I’m really pleased to hear that it worked well for you over the phone, I also think that sometimes doing it on the phone is a little bit easier than having to sit across the table from someone, but that might just be me, so I know it doesn’t work for everybody, particularly people who are hearing impaired or deaf and need Auslan or whatever, obviously, it’s not going to work for them. But going back, you can do your planning meeting over the phone and the other thing that you can do over the phone is request urgent changes, so when you ring the call centre at the moment, there’s an option to press I think it’s 5 and you can speak to someone if your issue is related to the Coronavirus or changes because of the Coronavirus and you can speak to someone and you can have changes made over the phone straight away so you don’t have to go through the whole review process.

So there are some really good things that they’ve introduced in the last little while to try and make sure that people have the support that they need while we’re in this sort of crisis period. Another couple of changes that they’ve made and they announced this just at the end of last week, and they finally will allow people who need a smart device for their disability support and don’t already have one, they will allow them to purchase one with their NDIS funds. So everyone out there knows that the issue of iPads and smart devices has been a very thorny one when it comes to the NDIS, but now people need smart devices because they might be doing their therapy online or they might be doing their meeting with an exercise group online and that’s really important for their health and wellbeing or they might be meeting with their support worker online, so that might need a smart device to do that. So the NDIA confirmed at the end of this week that people, as long as people don’t already have a device that does the trick and it’s related to their disability support, it can’t just be that they’re like the rest of us and they want to sort of binge on watching movies or Netflix, it’s got to be for their disability support, but if they meet that criteria, then they can purchase it with their NDIS funds.

Q: And that’s a great development and they should know and I think I may have spoken about this before, but what was reasonable and necessary before the pandemic or what wasn’t reasonable and necessary before the pandemic can be extremely reasonable and necessary now and that’s the case with a smart device, that it’s necessary now if you need to have online therapy and how else would you do it, so I think we can apply that to a lot of other areas as well. In the past, you might have thought, maybe that’s not quite reasonable and necessary, but thinking about it now, now that we’re in lockdown, now that we’re stuck in the house, now that providers are not operating the same way is it reasonable and necessary today?

A: Yeah, and I think there’s still a little bit more I think that the agency can do to still be a little bit more flexible and one of the areas that I think they still need to be a little bit more flexible, and it’s related to smart devices, is with data. Soyou might need to do your therapy online, so you might be using more data than you would ordinarily be using at other times. Now under normal circumstances, your Internet usage would be regarded as kind of a daily living cost and not something that you could claim from the NDIS, but if you’re now doing therapy online instead of doing it in person like you usually do, I think there’s an argument that that extra data should be a claimable cost from the NDIS because otherwise people aren’t going to be able to access the therapy that they really need because they don’t have enough data. Now I’m really fortunate in that I work from home a lot, so I already have a pretty big data package because I work from home, but I’m really privileged and really fortunate, so I want to make sure that same access is available for everybody, so I think that’s one of the things that they are going to have to be more flexible about is allowing people to pay the difference between their normal everyday Internet usage and this extra data that they’re having to use because they are having to do their supports online.

Q: And you’re right, data has become a disability support in the way that it never has been before.

A: Yeah, and if you really need that to do your therapy or to stay in touch, I’m really conscious that it’s not just therapy that people are doing online, we need all kinds of things to keep people safe and well over the coming weeks and months and that can include kind of mental health support, staying in touch with support workers who are helping you keep safe and well, so it’s not just therapy. And yes, not everybody has the same kind of access to data as perhaps you and I do, so that becomes I think something that the NDIA should look at, so through Every Australian Counts, we’ll certainly keep pushing that because we think that’s something that people really need at the moment, not everyone, but some people really do.

Q: How about grocery delivery? I heard somewhere that that’s been looked at, is grocery delivery now covered?

A: Yeah, so that was another really good thing that the NDIA confirmed at the end of last week which is that people can claim the cost of having their groceries delivered to home, so obviously not the cost of the groceries because that’s kind of on you, that’s up to you to pay for your own milk and bread, but the cost of having them delivered to your door can come out of your NDIS plan, if that’s something that you need at the moment either because you’re self isolating or because you’ve got no other way to get groceries to home.

Q: And that’s a smart move by the agency because A, you’re putting people at less risk, and B, you’re probably saving money which the NDIA would otherwise be paying for a support worker to go out there and get your groceries and this is a lot cheaper way of doing it.

A: Yeah, it’s not only cheaper, but I think it’s also smarter in that you’re having less people out and about shopping and getting out and about, so having the groceries home delivered along with grocery deliveries all around the country I think is a smart thing to do. George, we know not all, but some people with a disability are at much, much higher risk if they contract the virus and they’re at much greater risk of contracting it in the first place, so I reckon anything that the NDIA does to help reduce that risk is a good thing to do.

Q: Indeed, absolutely, I couldn’t agree with you more. Are there any other changes that people should know about?

A: Yeah, there have been a few changes that to be honest haven’t made a lot of people with disability and families very happy which is the other couple of changes they introduced is they’ve allowed some service providers to charge an extra 10% on some services over this next period, but what they haven’t done is increase everybody’s plans by 10% to cover that extra cost. So it’s not all services, it’s not an across the board blanket 10%, it’s only on some and the agency say they’ve done that is because they’re trying to recognise that in this period, service providers have got additional costs in delivering some of their services, so they’re trying to give them some funds to help cover those extra costs, but I would say from the traffic that we’ve got at Every Australian Counts and the number of complaints that we’ve had, it’s made people pretty cross that they haven’t increased plans by the same 10% and the agency says that well, given that most people don’t use all of their plans, most people can cover the extra 10% within their existing plan.

But George, you and I know that that’s not everyone, there are people who have got their plans budgeted to the last 50 cents, so if you increase prices by 10%, that really tips them over the edge and they need people to seek a review, so that’s really caused some angst and anxiety and anger amongst people with disability. And the other change that the NDIA’s introduced that has made people cross is they’ve changed the cancellation policy, so their usual cancellation policy is that if you cancel 24 or 48 hours before you use a service, you usually have to pay the 90% of the price of that service, and now the agency has changed that to a 10-day cancellation policy.

Q: Wow.

A: Yeah, so again, the reason that they’ve done this is because they want to make sure that there are service providers on the other side of this. What they’re trying to do is make sure that service providers still have some income coming in so they can keep their doors open and that when we all come out of this lockdown sort of period, there will be services on the other side for people with disability and their families to use, but the people who’ve contacted us at Every Australian Counts think it’s pretty tough because how could you possibly know 10 days out whether you were going to cancel a service or not unless you were already ill?

Q: It’s not very flexible, is it and I am worried about people who’ve been made aware, they need the flexibility and also worried about the people who are not going to have the 10% to spare and they’re going to be in trouble.

A: Yeah, so they’re going to need to seek a review, so the agency has been really clear that if you, if the 10% really jeopardises your support, you need to get on the phone and seek a review and make sure, now we know historically that they haven’t been very good at getting on to the reviews very quickly, nor have they been very good at triaging, making sure that people who urgently need changes are at the head of the queue, so they haven’t historically been very good and I understand why people feel really anxious about that kind of sort of blasé statement, oh well, just seek a review or we’ll deal with it quickly, so I understand why that makes people very nervous because historically, they haven’t been very good at it. But they do say that they’ve got a special team in there now and that they will prioritise those things and we will certainly, I’ve got to say, keep the pressure on and if we hear anything that it is taking too long, we’re certainly going to be keeping the pressure on for them to deal with things more quickly. So when people have contacted us or we’ve been able to say is don’t wait, get on to them, even if you think it might be a problem, don’t wait, get on the phone to the NDIA and get it sorted out quickly because you don’t want to be left in the lurch at any stage.

Q: It’s very good advice. It’s funny, though, with cancelling things, I always thought it should be, it should go both ways, I reckon that I should be able to invoice my provider if they cancel, so if I’m being inconvenienced if my provider cancels, if they can charge, why can’t I?

A; Yeah, well, actually, that’s funny, George, because we’ve had a bit of traffic on our social media account saying exactly the same thing. I also say that we would have people who’ve contacted us who don’t want their providers to disappear because of this period and I even know that myself, for example, we’ve got one provider we use who’s very, very, very small and only has a handful of clients, but we absolutely love this service and we would be devastated if we couldn’t use it. So I want her to be on the other side of this, to be able to work with Sophie, my daughter, and I’ve been contacted by other families who finally managed to find, and it’s usually small or medium sized providers who are doing really interesting and innovative things, just the kinds of things that we’ve always wanted to happen, and those families and those people have said, I don’t want those things to disappear because they can’t survive this period. So I think what they’re trying, I know it makes people really cross and how could you possibly know 10 days out whether you’re going to cancel a service or not, but we already don’t have enough service providers to meet people’s needs and we certainly don’t have enough diverse interesting service providers to meet people’s needs, and in rural and in regional areas, they definitely don’t have enough services. So I don’t want the service providers that people really value to go under during this period because we just, I don’t know how you feel, George, but I feel like we’re only just starting to see the kinds of things that we always wanted to see, and I don’t want those things to disappear.

Q: Yeah absolutely, business is business and people do need a bit of support to get through this time, we all need it. I’d just visit the agency, if the price is up 10% you should be putting the plans up by 10%.

A: Yeah.

Q: Are there any other things that people should know about?

A: No, I think they’re probably the main things, I guess the thing to let people know is a couple of things, the agency have now got a new section on the NDIS website which is just related to Coronavirus, so there is lots and lots and lots of information up there. As per usual, it can be a bit hard to kind of wade your way through, but one good thing they have done is they’ve done a question and answer type format, so what about this, and then they give an answer underneath that and they’ve also put some videos up there, some animations up there, there’s Auslan, there’s material in other languages and there is a little bit of Easy Read information, so they are trying to make sure that they reach everybody.

And I guess the other thing to let people know is that we managed to convince the agency at the end of this week to do a Zoom forum with us, so we did that on Thursday this week and we had Scott McNaughton who’s the General Manager in at the NDIA online answering people’s questions for an hour, and we let people about that by email and on social media and that forum was booked out in just 2 hours, so we had 300 people and then we had hundreds more on our waiting list who were really disappointed that we couldn’t let them join in, so we will definitely be holding more of these. We’re already talking to the agency about holding more of them because it’s one thing to read it on a website, but it’s actually another thing to be able to talk to a person in real life and get an answer to your question. The other thing that we will do is that we recorded the forum and we’re just putting some captions on it now, it was captioned then, but we’ve got to make sure that the captions synch with the recording and then we will put it up on the Every Australian Counts website next week so that all of those people who couldn’t make it can still watch the video.

Q: And discuss it, I love what you do with Every Australian Counts, you do some awesome work and I don’t think people realise that Every Australian Counts is you and another person, there aren’t thousands of you, but it feels like there is.

A: It’s actually the big secret, isn’t it, George about Every Australian Counts. Every Australian Counts is 2 people, it’s myself and the fantastic Jean who helps me behind the scenes and we also have a company that helps us, they host the website and things like that, so we can call on their help when we need it and for example, they helped us put on the forum because it was so much work to put on a forum for 300 people online, but yes, it is, I kind of describe Every Australian Counts is a bit like the Wizard of Oz, there’s a big wizard out the front making lots of noise and there’s one person on the bike out the back making it all happen.

Q: Kirsten the wizard, I like that.

A: No, but the truth is, George, that the real heart of Every Australian Counts is the people who take part in it, so it’s just Jean, it’s my job and Jean’s job to just try and provide the platform and the opportunity because the heart of it really belongs to people with disability and their families who run with it and take part in it, so the real success of Every Australian Counts is all the people who support it and who are part of the community and take part in it and it’s just Jean and I, it’s just our job to kind of create opportunities and create vehicles for people to do things.

Q: Can you advocate for any other changes? We had a couple of them, but are you advocating for anything else to be put in place by the agency?

A: Yeah, so 2 really, really important things, the first is more flexibility, so right now, we always advocate for more flexibility, right, because it’s the way to make sure that people with a disability and their families can really make their funding work for them, so that’s kind of always our starting position anyway. But right now, when things are so difficult and so changeable, things happen so fast, we just think that people should have more flexibility to use their funds in whatever way is going to work for them to help them get through the next little while, so that’s one of the most important things, more flexibility.

Q Absolutely. On the flexibility, I also remember reading that people can use their core supports for support coordinators that recently was also another improvement in terms of flexibility.

A: Yeah, and I guess that probably relates to my second point is that we think people need more help at the moment, so again, it’s one of the things that we’ve always advocated for is that the system is very confusing, it’s very bureaucratic, it’s also new, so people really need more help navigating it and now with everything changing and everything being different, people need more help than ever before. So people who are fairly well connected and well resourced and kind of can navigate their way through and have found some ways to things differently in the last little while, but that’s not everyone and right now, people really need help. We’ve been contacted by people whose service providers have stopped providing services and they don’t know what to do next and nobody is helping them with that, only people who’ve got a support coordinator have someone on their side to help them get through and we think that everybody needs a hand in the next little while, so that’s the thing that we’re advocating for is to really make sure that we give people whatever help they need at the moment so they can get through the next few weeks and months safe and well.

Q: Absolutely, and I hope people who might not have had funding for support and nursing will now be able to access it through their core funding, but the problem then is that what if they don’t have enough core funding, so if you don’t have enough core funding, please ask for it soon, do it, get on to it as you said Kirsten, and that’s some fantastic advice, thank you so much for your time, Kirsten. I know that you’re incredibly busy, so it’s always wonderful to talk to you.

A: It’s always great to talk to you George, and I just, like I said, the awesome thing about Every Australian Counts is the people in it and what I’ve really been touched by in the last month or so is the way that everybody in our community has reached out and tried to help each other and I reckon it’s the only way we’re all going to make our way through this if we all look out for one another, so I think Every Australian Counts is just one way that people can do that.

Q: Absolutely, thanks, Kirsten, take care.

A: No worries, thanks, George, you too.

Q: That’s all we have time for on today’s episode of Reasonable and Necessary, brought to you by the Summer Foundation.

Check out our Facebook page for all previous podcasts and transcripts.

We also love hearing from you, so please leave your comments and suggestions for future episodes.

Remember for the most up to date info on the Coronavirus, call the Coronavirus help line on 1800 020 080 or visit health.gov.au.

Stay tuned for our next episode and please stay safe and remember to wash your hands.

END OF TRANSCRIPT