

# New front opens in ADHD war

## Expert questions drug use as scheme costs soar

By **LOUISE HALL**  
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PRESCRIPTIONS for medications to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, have soared since Government subsidies slashed the cost of the drugs.

Medicare data shows prescriptions for ADHD medications rose by 24.5 per cent between April and December last year after a new, long-acting stimulant drug, Concerta, was put on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). Strattera, a non-stimulant drug, was added to the PBS last July.

The figures have emerged as the NSW Government is preparing to issue a review into the treatment of ADHD in children after an outcry about the amount of psychiatric medication being prescribed to children.

Before Concerta was added to the PBS, it cost \$150 a script. Now it costs \$31.30. Concerta, Strattera, Ritalin and dexamphetamine cost the taxpayer \$9.89 million between April and July last year.

University of Sydney professor Joseph Rey, a specialist in child and adolescent psychiatry, has urged doctors to review their patients' need for

medication. In an editorial in last week's *Medical Journal Of Australia* he said findings in a US study showed ADHD medications were of limited use in the long term. Behavioural intervention might be sufficient for some children.

He said there might be a certain amount of "growing out" involved with the condition.

"This does not mean that stimulants no longer have a place in the treatment of ADHD," Professor Rey said.

"However, that place has shrunk and clinicians should be circumspect."

About 300,000 Australian children between six and 17 suffer from ADHD, a brain disorder that can cause learning difficulties and behavioural problems. Although ADHD affects between 3 and 5 per cent of children, only 1 to 2 per cent take medication.

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians, which will issue its own guidelines this year, says stimulant medication is "the single most effective treatment", with success in about 80 per cent of children.

Professor Florence Levy of the University of NSW's School of Psychiatry says the figures suggest ADHD medication is not overused.

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Going public on illness ... Mark Brandtman and his son Jack.

### Medication helped our lives to improve

AS PRESCRIPTIONS for medications to treat ADHD skyrocket, three members of a Sydney family have appeared on YouTube to defend their decision to take the controversial drugs.

Mark Brandtman, 51, and his sons Patrick, 22, and Jack, 19, have posted nine clips on the popular website aiming to debunk myths surrounding the condition, such as that ADHD is a "cop-out for bad parenting" and not a bona fide medical condition.

Mr Brandtman, a former school teacher who now runs a boutique educational consultancy for adults and children with ADHD and learning difficulties, was diagnosed with the condition in 1995, a year after Patrick, who was then nine. Jack was diagnosed in 1997.

As the doctor was describing the symptoms of ADHD, I thought: "He's describing me," Mr Brandtman said. **Louise Hall**

Photo: Anthony Johnson