

# PRESS RELEASE

## Australian Multiple Birth Association

### *Little rationale for the Multiple Birth Allowance...*

### *Families with triplets and quadruplets speak out*

*The Australian Multiple Birth Association (AMBA) represents families with twins, triplets, quadruplets and more across Australia. All of these types of births are referred to as “multiple births”, while triplets, quadruplets and quintuplets are known as “Higher Order Multiples” (or HOMs) as a way of distinguishing this minority within a minority: indeed, less than 1.5% of multiples are HOMs. The most recent data available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that in 2012, only 59 out of 4,480 multiple births were HOMs, from a total of 309,582 births (Births, 2012).*

AMBA is disappointed to read in the Commission of Audit report the recommendation that the Multiple Birth Allowance (the Allowance) be removed and the assertion that there is little rationale for the existence of the Allowance. As the representative of multiple birth families, we are also disappointed that AMBA was not contacted by the authors of the report to help them understand the need for the Allowance and how it helps HOM families.

The Allowance is **only** paid to HOM families who meet the income eligibility tests for Family Tax Benefit Part A and have three or more surviving babies from a single pregnancy. The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling Studies (NATSEM) shows costs are decreasing for families for the second and subsequent children. This is based on the premise that items purchased for the first child are able to be passed onto subsequent children. This is not the case for multiple birth families. NATSEM also shows that the biggest increases to cost of living are in childcare and education – two areas of immediate expense where families with HOMs are unable to spread the cost.

“Families with HOMs have costs that are greater than those incurred for three or more singleton births due to the simultaneous nature of the costs and inability to “hand down” items. They require three, four or more cots, car seats, high chairs, sets of nappies, as well as clothing in the same size for the children. If breastfeeding is not an option, the cost of formula and the need for bottles is tripled or more and, unlike families who have singleton births, that cost is not spread out over a period of years. The same applies to all aspects of raising multiple birth children over the years including the purchase of school uniforms, excursions and multiple sets of textbooks”, said AMBA’s Chairperson Lorna Barrett.

The report has included large and multiple birth families in the same section and rationale. We feel that this is short-sighted as the Allowance is paid to families who have endured a high-risk pregnancy with HOM babies most commonly being born prematurely. As a result HOM children frequently have some physical, intellectual, social and/or behavioural disorders which may necessitate multiple children requiring long-term intervention and assistance. Whilst these children are generally eligible for some assistance from local, state and federal Governments, there is an ongoing shortfall that the family must meet, which adds to the drain on the already stretched family resources.

“Parents with HOMs are more susceptible to stress-related disorders and depression. The risk of family breakdown is increased. The financial pressure placed on these families has a huge impact in the lives of the children. Parents will often make decisions that affect their singleton children knowing that they will not be able to afford the same for their multiples. This means not only do multiples miss out on opportunities and experiences, so do their siblings”, said Mrs Barrett.

HOM families are impacted by the inability to re-use equipment, mobility issues, increased social isolation of parents leading to decreased wellbeing and increased mental health problems, increased costs and decreased availability of childcare for multiple birth infants possibly leading to inability for one parent to

return to paid work; they face financial hardship and increased costs of housing and transport to accommodate large families.

AMBA successfully lobbied the government to extend the Allowance to cover families until their HOM children reached the age of 18, provided three or more of the HOMs were in full-time study (prior to this change, the Allowance ceased when the HOMs reached six years of age). HOM families around Australia have benefited from this extension since 2008 and are incredibly grateful for the additional support that it provided as their children moved into the schooling environment. It must be kept in mind that these parents have not set out to have HOMs, yet they have to face all of these added costs whilst parenting in conditions foreign to the everyday parent.

The Allowance is an investment in Australia's future. At an annual payment of \$3,752.20 for triplets or \$4,996.85 for quads or higher (Family Assistance Guide, FAHCSIA), the expected cost saving appears insignificant compared to the major impacts that will be felt by eligible families. These impacts have been described by a number of HOM families in the following quotes.

"As a single mother of five, including quadruplets, the extra money I receive as a result of the Allowance would be the difference in keeping a roof over our head – sounds dramatic I know, but unfortunately the cost in raising these kiddies is getting more expensive each and every year. I dread the thought of how I'm going to do it", Suzy, from Wagga Wagga, single mother to Harry, Priyah, Baxter, Ruby (9) and Archer Ceeney (7).

"The allowance has made a huge difference to our family. Aside from the ongoing extra costs of clothing, nappies and formula (which can't be handed down from previous children), so many multiple birth babies are premature, which requires ongoing specialist appointments and medications. Even something as common as reflux means triple the medication, which can get expensive", said HOM mum Michelle, member of Ipswich Multiple Birth Association and mother to Isabel (2), and Violet, Sebastian and Max (1).

"My husband is on an average wage; there is absolutely no way we could have survived without this extra money. It is appalling that the Commission of Audit think that this money is something that is an extra to large families, NOT a necessity", said Bron, member of Northern Beaches Multiple Birth Association and mother to William, Mitchell and Charlotte aged 16-½ months.

"While I was able to spend a lot of time while pregnant sourcing second-hand clothing, this was greatly reduced by the time limitations in caring for triplets. We did not receive the multiple birth allowance for the first 18 months because of a data input error by Centrelink. That payment would have greatly reduced our need for me to return to work when they were 8 months old, which then created major increases in our family stress as we still could not afford childcare until we received that payment at 18 months when I investigated the error after others telling me about it. The stress during that period of time was magnified by our financial situation. Also once the kids entered childcare, for the first year all five of us were constantly sick and at the doctors as they picked up every bug. As none of them had developed any immunities as would be the case with families with staggered ages, the medication costs were horrendous", said Roxanne, member of Brisbane Multiple Birth Association Southside and mother to James, Michael and Georgia (4).

"My three have just started high school in a public school. Our costs at the beginning of the term were \$250 each for uniforms, \$275 each for school and subject fees which will be around the same each year till they finish school as well as \$75 each for a compulsory focus day. When you have triplets there are no decreasing marginal costs for set expenses related to their schooling. This was the reason the multiple birth allowance was given in the first place. Imagine if we all rocked into school or preschool and said I'll pay full for the first child but I'm only paying 83% for the second and then 69% for the third", said Liz, member of Newcastle Multiple Birth Club and mother to Cassidy (14) and Kaitlyn, Charlotte and Isabella (12).

"We were given this payment then it was cut when the girls turned 6, then after a policy change they received it again at 10 years old; we definitely need the Allowance. The girls are in Year 12 and we are lucky that the school supplies text books. One of our daughters does woodwork and food tech and one does music. But if they all did woodwork and food tech we'd be up for thousands of dollars. They have had

lots of excursions which are very costly and without this money I think we wouldn't be able to cope at all with their needs. We would struggle to teach them to drive with fuel costs and they can't work as we live too far from town", Katrina, mother to Caitlin, Laura and Yasmin (16).

"As a mum of seven it hasn't cost me less for each child I have had as I have had a number of years in between pregnancies, different sexes and they have been born in different seasons. As a result I haven't been able to hand down clothes for any of them. The Allowance helps me to buy nappies and clothes for my children", said Chrystale, member of Canberra and Region MBA (CARMBA) and mother to Jaysson (18), Hannah (9), Kaeden (6), Ellie (2) and Mia, Kai and Avah (10 months).

"It's the ongoing costs as a result of our triplets being born prematurely that add up for our family. We have early intervention once a fortnight, speech pathology (via 3 appointments weekly), paediatrician appointments, hearing specialists and heart specialists. As we live in a rural town, the closest appointments are an hour away and each child has separate appointments, which means my husband Scott has to take a day off work to help. All other appointments are in Canberra or Sydney (between 2.5 hrs and 6 hrs drive away). At the moment the Allowance covers the cost of nappies and that's it, nothing else. Three children the same age can't hand down clothes, shoes, bedding etc. My biggest concern is the cost of attending appointments as it's not just the appointment itself, it's the cost in travel / accommodation etc. A change to the Medicare system would also bring additional costs that we can't cover. Our whole family recently got flu shots, it was an appointment per person that is 8 x \$15 plus purchasing the vaccinations as well, but 4 kids (under 10) needed two needles so it would have been an additional four appointments plus purchases of vaccinations. In the next two weeks I'll have two trips to Canberra and four trips to Cooma, a total of 13 hours travel just for appointments", said Karen, member of CARMBA and mother to Thomas (17), Kayla (13), River (6) and Nash, Kobi and Liam (2).

Lorna Barrett, AMBA Chairperson

[chairperson@amba.org.au](mailto:chairperson@amba.org.au)

Phone: 0400 666 994

[www.amba.org.au](http://www.amba.org.au)