

Diabetes talk ‘harmful and inaccurate’

Diabetes Australia and the Australian Medical Association (Victoria) are calling for greater awareness and more sensitivity in the way health professionals and the media talk about diabetes.

Diabetes Australia today released its position statement *‘A new language for diabetes: Improving communications with and about people with diabetes.’*

The statement has been developed by a multidisciplinary working group and highlights the implications of certain words and phrases often used to describe and discuss diabetes in Australia.

It also makes recommendations for modifying this language.

An estimated 1.7 million Australians have diabetes and 275 Australians develop the condition every day.

Research shows people with diabetes have higher levels of emotional distress than those without diabetes and this distress can last a lifetime.

Diabetes Australia Chief Executive Lewis Kaplan said referring to diabetes as a *‘disease’* and describing people living with the condition as *‘diabetics’* or *‘sufferers’* is commonplace in this country, particularly in the media.

However he said this type of language can be harmful and inaccurate.

“Words can empower or disempower someone very easily. We hope this position statement will encourage health professionals and the media to consider more carefully both their language and the effect that it may have on the way that people with diabetes think, feel and act.”

AMA Victoria Board Member Dr Lorraine Baker said doctors understand the impact that language can have when treating patients. “The doctor-patient relationship is not an equal one and the words chosen by doctors have a powerful impact on the way that patients view their condition, their treatment and themselves.”

“It is of concern to the medical profession that patients with certain conditions including diabetes can become defined by their medical condition. We must avoid defining patients by a diagnosis. When inappropriate language is used people with diabetes may feel blamed for their condition.”



Foundation Director of the Australian Centre for Behavioural Research in Diabetes Professor Jane Speight said health professionals commonly use words like '*non-compliant*' or '*poorly controlled*' without realising the damage that such language can do.

“Using this type of language can make people feel that their health professional doesn’t appreciate the efforts they make to manage their diabetes. This can contribute to feelings of frustration, guilt and distress, as well as being demotivating.”

Renza Scibilia has lived with type 1 diabetes since 1998 and believes releasing the position statement is critical.

“I don’t believe there is any malice behind the way some health professionals communicate with people living with diabetes, but there is definitely room for improvement. A little thought goes a long way.”

Diabetes Australia CEO Lewis Kaplan said it may take time for the recommendations included in the position statement to be comprehensively adopted.

“We expect the release of this position statement to provoke vigorous debate among health professionals and the wider community. However we believe this is something that must be discussed and Diabetes Australia is taking the lead by putting this issue in the public domain.”

Diabetes Australia is the peak consumer body representing people affected by diabetes and those at risk.

Available for interview:

Lewis Kaplan - Diabetes Australia CEO

Dr Lorraine Baker – Australian Medical Association Victorian Board Member

Jane Speight – Foundation Director, Australian Centre for Behavioural Research in Diabetes (position statement author)

Renza Scibilia – has lived with type 1 diabetes since 1998

Nick D'Addazio – lives with type 1 diabetes

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Case Studies

Renza Scibilia

Renza Scibilia does everything she can to manage her type 1 diabetes.

She regularly checks her blood sugar levels and makes adjustments accordingly; she uses an insulin pump and ensures she has a good support system.

However, despite her best efforts, living with type 1 diabetes means that Renza's life doesn't always go to plan. This was the case earlier this year when she found herself in a hospital emergency room.

"I had gastro and needed to be rehydrated. I knew my blood sugar levels were a little high, but generally they were okay."

An emergency room doctor wanted to remove Renza's insulin pump, something she knew was unnecessary.

"I told him that my blood sugar levels were fine and that my insulin pump was working."

After some debate, the doctor left the room.

Renza then overheard him telling a nurse that she was being 'non-compliant'.

"I wasn't being non-compliant, I was insisting I get the best care and I know what that is because I know more about my diabetes than anyone else."

The doctor's choice of language made Renza feel judged.

"Diabetes is a condition over which you have no control. Some health professionals use the terms 'good' and 'bad' management. But, you know what? Sometimes you just have diabetes."

Careless or negative 'diabetes talk' doesn't just occur during healthcare consultations.

As someone who has type 1 diabetes, Renza would like to see more of a definition in the media between her condition, which can't be prevented, and type 2 diabetes, which can be prevented in up to 60% of cases. She also balks at suggestions she is a 'sufferer'.

"I am living with a condition, but I'm not suffering. The second people start painting the picture that someone with diabetes is a victim, it does us a great disservice."

Renza believes Diabetes Australia's Language Position Statement is 'critical' and 'revolutionary'.

"This statement is about finding a different way to say things and I am extremely optimistic that it will lead to a positive shift in improving communications with and about people with diabetes."

Renza Scibilia has lived with type 1 diabetes since 1998.

Nicholas D'Addazio

Nick D'Addazio was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes when he was 11-years-old.

The Blackburn Secondary School student is now an incredibly active 16-year-old who is involved in everything from basketball to kick-boxing and skateboarding.

Nick has a positive attitude about his condition, which he says has a lot to do with the language used by his parents.

"In the past I would say to my dad 'I'm a diabetic.' He would correct me and say 'no, you are a person who happens to have diabetes. There is nothing that other people do that you can't do.'"

Sometimes it's Nick who is left to do the correcting.

"I've had doctors say 'So, you suffer from diabetes.' I'll say 'No, I self-manage my diabetes, I don't suffer.'"

For Nick, even a simple job application can raise questions about the language society uses to define him and how he chooses to identify himself.

"An application will ask if I suffer from a disease and I'll be left scratching my head."

Nick believes the Diabetes Australia Language Position Statement is a crucial step in the right direction.

"I hope this leads to people being more thoughtful about the language they use to describe people living with diabetes. I am looking forward to a future where I am not labelled as a diabetic or a sufferer, because I am so much more than my condition."