MEETING THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF OLDER AUSTRALIANS

The 2006-07 Budget contains a series of initiatives to meet special and particular needs of older Australians, the Federal Minister for Ageing, Senator Santo Santoro, said tonight.

“The Howard Government recognises that different people require different kinds of support from their Government as they grow older, and when the time comes for them to access aged care,” Senator Santoro said.

“Measures in this Budget acknowledge the ageing-related needs of a range of people, including older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and people who have particular needs in relation to certain conditions. It also brings financial arrangements for accessing residential aged care into line with pension arrangements.

“I believe these measures will deliver a range of assistance to tens of thousands of Australians in the years ahead.”

- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care – additional places – funding increased by $15.1 million over four years**

A further 150 aged care places have been designated for use by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people under the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Strategy over the next four years.

These flexible care places will help ensure that more, older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can access culturally appropriate and more viable care services, as close as possible to their communities.

The additional places will increase funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander places by $15.1 million over four years.

- **Continued capital assistance for rural and remote providers – $134.2 million over four years**

Continuation of this funding will assist eligible aged care homes in rural and remote areas to upgrade and extend their facilities to meet building standards and demand for quality residential aged care services.
• **Optical health – support – $13.8 million over four years**

The Government is committing $13.8 million over four years to this new initiative to promote eye health and reduce avoidable blindness and loss of vision.

“Much vision loss and blindness in Australia is potentially avoidable through prevention activities, early detection and intervention. However, many Australians with treatable eye diseases do not seek help until it is too late for sight to be preserved,” Senator Santoro said.

“The initiative will be targeted at people who are at particular risk of eye disease and injury, including older people, people with a family history of eye disease, people with diabetes and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”

• **Improving care for older patients in public hospitals – $152.7 million over four years**

At the Council of Australian Governments’ (COAG) meeting on 10 February, the Government announced its contribution of $152.7 million to improve care for older patients in public hospitals around Australia. This initiative will work to minimise the length of stay in hospital, avoid unnecessary admissions and improve care services, particularly when people live longer term in smaller, rural hospitals.

The Government will provide this funding over four years to the state and territories, complementing the joint Commonwealth, state and territory Transition Care Programme which aims to help older people return home after a hospital stay rather than enter residential care.

• **Aged care and pensions – further harmonisation**

Income and asset testing rules for aged care will be brought into line with those for pension purposes in relation to the gifting of assets and the concessional treatment of complying income streams.

The changes will apply from 1 January 2007. Existing aged care residents will not be affected by the new rules unless they change homes.

The new rules will provide greater simplicity and encourage wise financial planning. They will ensure that older Australians who can afford it will make a fairer contribution to the cost of their residential aged care.

This is expected to save approximately $72 million over four years from 2006-07 to 2009-10.

In addition, the Government will continue funding for the following programmes for a further four years from 2006-07 to 2009-10:

- **Psychogeriatric support services – continue funding of $23.7 million over four years**

The Government will provide continued funding of $23.7 million over four years to expand psychogeriatric support services to give national coverage through the Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Services.
– **National Continence Management Strategy – continue funding of $18.2 million over four years**
Continued funding of $18.2 million over four years will support initiatives to improve continence awareness, management and treatment for people affected by incontinence, to assist them to live and participate in their community with confidence and dignity. An estimated 3.8 million Australians are affected by incontinence.

– **Aged care income test – continuation of 28-day grace period – $23.8 million over four years**
This funding will enable the Government to continue to pay the daily residential care subsidy for new residents for the first 28 days until their income assessment is finalised by Centrelink or the Department of Veterans’ Affairs. This period of grace ensures that new residents are not inappropriately asked to pay income-tested fees, and simplifies administrative arrangements for providers.

– **National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre – continue funding of $1.1 million over four years**
The Government has committed $1.1 million over the next four years – which will be matched by funding provided by the National Seniors Association over the same period – to enable the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre to continue its research programme into how best to support and promote productive ageing.

In addition, there are measures to support people suffering from arthritis and osteoporosis, and people needing palliative care in the community. These Budget measures are being announced tonight by the Minister for Health and Ageing, Tony Abbott.

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