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FOR MEDIA

Ombudsman finds use of automation in aged care system lacks safeguards

The Commonwealth Ombudsman found that the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing (the Department) and its Single Assessment System (SAS), including its Integrated Assessment Tool (IAT) and oversight of the SAS workforce, has led to unfair outcomes, undermined public confidence and raised serious questions about outcomes that are clinically inappropriate.

The aged care system in Australia provides subsidised and fully funded aged care services to older persons. To access aged care services, older persons are required to undergo a needs assessment. The IAT is the legislatively prescribed tool used for home care assessments. Its algorithm makes automated decisions that determine the level of access to aged care services an older person can receive.

'The IAT and its associated decision-making framework do not merely have the potential to undermine public confidence: rather, a reasonable person would, in my view, lack confidence that the system is in fact fair and consistent. Currently, under the law, automated decisions made by the IAT's algorithm cannot be overridden and changed, even if they are clinically inappropriate,' said Commonwealth Ombudsman, Iain Anderson.

85% of older persons, (around 1.1 million) access aged care services in Australia through the home support system. Since the introduction of the SAS, many concerns have been raised about the contracted assessment providers using the IAT and how the IAT algorithm works.

Concerns about the SAS workforce included poor communication, substantial waiting times, slow review processes, insufficient assessors and assessors lacking appropriate

training and qualifications. Criticism of the IAT focuses on underassessing care needs, diminishing the role of clinical expertise, the lack of algorithmic transparency and the inability to change automated decisions.

There is no publicly available information that explains how the IAT reaches its outcomes. This is inconsistent with the intentions of the Robodebt Royal Commission recommendations about transparency of government automated decision-making.

'In my view, the Department did not, and may still not, understand key components of the legal framework it created, nor did it understand what legal framework it was meant to create. This had serious consequences, including that up until the introduction of the legislation in October 2025, the Department had been incorrectly advising assessment providers and the public that automated IAT outcomes could be changed,' added Mr Anderson.

The SAS assessment provider performance has been falling short of KPIs, often significantly so. Despite individual assessors inputting information into the IAT, the Department has taken a limited role in checking compliance with learning requirements, and there are no safeguards or mechanisms to protect the integrity of online training.

The Ombudsman made 10 recommendations that include amending the legislation to allow assessment decision-makers to override automated IAT decisions, a comprehensive review of the legislation related to the needs assessment process, and a comprehensive review of the business rules underpinning the algorithm.

The Ombudsman also recommended that all changes be preceded by meaningful consultation with the public, and that the Australian National Audit Office consider a performance audit to assess whether the Department's use of public resources was efficient, economical and ethical. The Department accepted the recommendations relevant to it.

Read the full report on the Commonwealth Ombudsman website.

For more information visit ombudsman.gov.au or for media enquiries email media@ombudsman.gov.au