

# 1. Introduction

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is generally thought of as a disorder that only affects children. The reality is that a significant number of adults experience ADHD. Adults who have ADHD don't suddenly develop the symptoms of ADHD in their adult years, they have experienced the symptoms most of their lives. Although adult ADHD has gained acceptance among experts as a valid disorder, it remains a controversial diagnosis.

ADHD manifests somewhat differently in adults than it does in children.<sup>1</sup> The symptoms of inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity, in particular, generally decrease in intensity with age. While the hyperactive child squirms, fidgets and is constantly 'on the go', the hyperactive adult typically experiences intense feelings of restlessness. They may have trouble relaxing and they may overwork. Impulsive children blurt out answers, interrupt others, and talk excessively. Adults with impulsivity display similar behaviour by incessantly talking, being impatient in lines or in traffic, often interrupting conversations, and impulsively spending or quitting a job. Inattentive children have difficulty listening, following through, and have problems with forgetfulness. Adults with inattention find it difficult to focus, plan, organise, and complete tasks at work and at home. They often complain of losing personal items, such as keys and wallets, are late for appointments, don't listen during conversations, and lack concentration when reading.<sup>2,3</sup>

Unlike children with ADHD—who have their parents, teachers and other carers to support them in their daily activities—adults with ADHD often lack the benefit of any support. Unlike children, adults are generally expected to self-regulate their behaviour and activities. It is thought that self-regulation in people who have ADHD is impaired due to a vulnerability in the way the brain controls its thinking and learning and behaviour; in particular, the cognitive processes of executive functioning, working memory, and speed and flexibility of processing.<sup>4,5</sup> Thus, for adults with ADHD who have this impairment, self-regulation is extraordinarily difficult. As a result, normal daily activities can be particularly challenging for adults with ADHD.<sup>3</sup>

Some adults with ADHD fare relatively well. They use their strengths—energy, enthusiasm, motivation, and creativity—to pursue careers that are suited to their strengths, such as entertainment, sports, and sales. Others fare poorly and experience academic failure, employment failure, poor driving records, substance abuse, and even imprisonment.<sup>6–10</sup> The majority of adult sufferers fare somewhere in between: they manage but function below their potential in many or all areas of their lives.<sup>11</sup>

Research into adult ADHD has steadily grown in recent years. Although the body of information on adult ADHD lags substantially behind that on child ADHD, strong evidence has accumulated to support the use of stimulant medication in the treatment of adult ADHD. As is the case for children with ADHD, stimulants are the mainstay of treatment for adults with ADHD.

This study, published as a supplement of the *NSW Public Health Bulletin*, aims to present information on the prescribing of stimulant medication for the treatment of ADHD in adults. The study firstly examines the controversy surrounding adult ADHD. The prevalence of the disorder among adults and the persistence of ADHD

symptoms from childhood to adulthood are considered next. The study also looks at the diagnosis of adult ADHD and the treatment options available, paying particular attention to the use of stimulant medication. The restrictions that are in place in New South Wales (NSW) for the prescribing of stimulant medication for adults with ADHD are described. The study then presents trends in the prescribing of stimulant medication in NSW over the last decade or so, and the characteristics of adults recently treated with stimulant medication. The study concludes with a discussion of these trends.