

A DSP Review now referred to by Centrelink as a Medical Service Update, can be a confusing and unsettling process. In a focus group with people with HIV, participants discussed their most recent experiences of a DSP Review.

Although individual experiences can be quite different, participants agreed there are some common key points that people should bear in mind to help them through the process especially if they have not experienced a **DSP Review** before.

This factsheet offers information and some practical tips on how to better understand the **DSP Reviews**.

John: I found myself having to do a bit of research first. To find out exactly what criteria I was being assessed against before I filled out any forms. I read it off the net (go to www.centrelink.gov.au). I was fishing for hours. On the Centrelink site you can get information on eligibility criteria and all that sort of thing.

Robert: The biggest fear for me was that feeling of all or nothing. If you fail the interview you get nothing; if you pass you get it all. One person makes that decision. That wouldn't be such a big issue if there were options for people in my position-studying. Hopefully after I finish my course, I will get off the pension and get into a job. But at the moment there is that transition period. Having gone off the pension previously it wasn't fun trying to get back on it again. I have to be sure that there is something in place to see me through that transition period.

There's nothing at the moment in terms of what's offered to get people off the pension on a voluntary basis. I guess the whole review process wouldn't be such a big deal if there were a structure there. If they made it easier to get on and off the pension, I think they'd probably save themselves a lot of money.

Consider yourself to be an ‘educator’: you have to describe in as much detail as you can the impact HIV has had on your life, as the interviewer will have no specialist knowledge of HIV, treatments and their side-effects.

Previously, most DSP recipients were medically reviewed every two to five years though this doesn’t seem to have been the norm for most HIV positive DSP recipients until relatively recently. Centrelink is now moving from the two to five year review system towards an automated system of *Service Profiling* where DSP recipients are selected for service update (review) at random, dependent on pensioner profile.

Service Profiling Medical Service Updates (which is what these are called) work on the basis that a form is sent to you asking a range of questions relating to illness, disability, education, assets and income. It also includes a section for a GP or specialist to fill in. You have 91 days to return the form and an additional 21 days for the reminder.

This contact is a mail contact and doesn’t require a face-to-face interview though Centrelink may call you in for one after they’ve received the information.

Not everyone is reviewed. People who meet Centrelink criteria for very severe impairment are excluded.

Neil reflects: Well I’d gone 11 years without being reviewed. I started doing volunteer work and then all of a sudden I was reviewed. After 11 years I really wasn’t expecting it. I was sent forms to complete. I was told that they were going to continue the pension. However, the letter I got was quite menacing, just the way it was worded. I’ve been nervous ever since and that’s what’s made me afraid of Centrelink. I didn’t realise the power they had to control my life. ... I feel I have to stop my volunteer work and my Mobility Allowance because I don’t want to draw attention to myself.

Other Centrelink Reviews

These apply to everyone on Centrelink benefits. They’re initiated by a particular event, occurrence or Centrelink query. For instance they can be initiated if:

- You have not declared income
- You have under declared earnings
- Centrelink decide to check your income and assets (which happens periodically)
- Have a significant change in circumstance
- Centrelink doesn’t have enough current data on you to make a decision

During an income and asset or payment correctness review, the three all important questions that a DSP recipient with HIV might expect to be asked at the end of an interview to check income and assets, or identify un-declared or under declared income are:

- Do you receive treatment for your disabilities, illnesses or injuries (eg medication, physical therapy, counselling)?
- Do you think your medical condition is improving?
- Are you managing your symptoms better?



Depending on how you answer these questions (and how the rest of the review goes) Centrelink may order a medical/ work capacity review. They can be tricky questions and that is why it is a good idea to take someone to the interview for support and to help you with your answers.

Brett: In my experience there are a lot of traps in the forms. I got the sense that they were asking the same question two or three times but worded in different ways.

As soon as the interviewer touches the computer key that response can be your whole life. The person interviewing me asked: "What's your condition?" I said: "Well what do you mean?" He said: "Are you getting noticeably better?" I replied: "Well no I'm static." And he basically said, without saying it, don't say that you're getting better or you're going to have to go off the DSP. He then said: "Are you still on medications?" I said: "Yes definitely? I'm not going to wake up in the morning and the HIV has gone."

Richard: I ended up on the DSP at the end of July last year, just over a year ago. A letter came 12 months after I'd been on the DSP, maybe because I was studying. I also got a small scholarship to go to University, which I told Centrelink about. That may have triggered my review. And yeah, I was uneasy about it.

Brett: I worked for a while and went off the pension completely for about 18 months. I tried to get back on the pension and the process was hell. So much so that it just would scare the shit out of me to even want to have to go through that again. I don't think I'd want to. Any talk of there'll be a review scares me. I am studying, so I was expecting to get a review eventually. I was expecting it and expecting it and expecting it and eventually the letter turned up.

How do you prepare for the DSP review interview?

Being prepared may help you cope better before and during the interview.

Make notes before your interview about: your daily routines, your energy levels, your previous treatment regimes and the associated side-effects, any other medications you may have had prescribed by your GP and details of all your health issues over the previous 12 months. Take these notes to the interview with you along with your treating doctor's report so that you can refer to them if necessary during the interview. Relax as much as possible before and after the interview.

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Brendan: The interviewer did not have much of an idea about HIV and treatment side-effects. Do not take anything for granted or assume anything when you're talking to them about HIV. You do have to be an educator.

This is how Peter, Richard, Neil and Tim prepared for their review:

Peter: Going to my doctor was the first step. There were two documents that we had to complete, to bring to the interview. The one the doctor had to complete was a mini booklet. The other one was a booklet for me to complete. It was quite lengthy. I was quite freaked out about it until I took it into my doctor. It's a big ask to walk into a GP these days and ask: "Can you spend 15 minutes to fill out this form?" But he was great and after that I wasn't so freaked out about it.

Richard: When I got the letter I thought I'm going to have to go and get a doctor's report. In fact they were only after financial stuff. They wanted bank details ... the most recent statement. I thought I don't want them seeing everything I've bought. I just printed out the last week of my bank statement off the Internet and that was okay. Once again he accepted that however another interviewer might not.

Neil: Get some emotional support. See your doctor. I see my social worker. It's important to get support from somewhere.

I got my doctor to fill out the forms. The reviewer ...had a folder with all these tick boxes. I said look there's no way you're going to be able to assess me in the time that you've allocated, here my doctor has done this. I threw all the paper work down and he flicked through it and said: "Okay, we'll be in contact."

Tim: Keep records of everything, I've got a whole file full of Centrelink stuff. Photocopy the lot and then file it. If they come back to me a couple of years later, at least I can refer back to see what I've done, what I've sent to them in the past.

I take copies and records of my reviews and I go back over them and make sure I'm consistent with what I've been saying.

At the interview – what happened?

The emphasis of the Centrelink 'reviewer' is to focus on your "ability to work" rather than your "disability". In the interviews they ask about what you can do rather than what you can't do. It is important to be honest and give as much information as possible on your daily routines and explain how HIV impacts your daily life.

The interview may seem intimidating especially because of the letter you have already received advising you of the need to have a review. Most people think they are about to lose their pension rather than it being a way of Centrelink "checking in" with the client to see how they are doing!



This is how Brett and Rodney expressed it:

Brett: From their point of view, their job is to get as many people back into the workforce as they can. Because I was studying full-time (20 hours a week) the interviewer asked why couldn't I work 20 hours a week? I'm not going to lose my place at TAFE if I don't show up one or two days because I don't feel well. Studying has more flexibility. I would lose my job if I called in sick too often... that's the basic truth of it. DSP is my fallback. If I stuff up my study, well it doesn't really matter at the end of the day. I'm still going to have some money coming in.

Rodney: They focused on my daily routine. She said: "What do you do?" I said: "I sleep." She replied: "Is that it?" I said: "That's about it."

The system is geared up wrongly in that people are scared. Their motive, presumably, is to help people to get on with life. But the system in practice is geared up so that they don't give you enough comfort zone or fallback. If you do a bit of volunteer work, a bit of study, do some part-time work you cut your own throat.

The reviewer is not a doctor let alone an HIV specialist – it's a bureaucratic process, not a medical process.

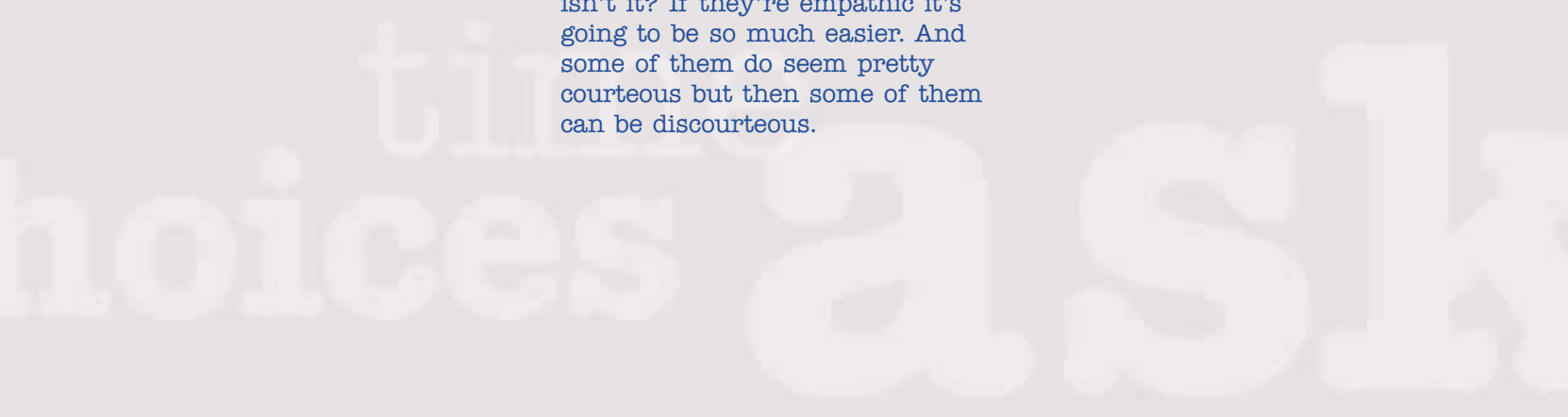
People with HIV found they had to be an educator and not to take anything for granted when they were talking to the Centrelink interviewer about HIV.

Brendan: A couple of years earlier my encounters with Centrelink had been fairly good because there was a dedicated person to look after people with HIV. Now a reviewer comes in especially to do it and that freaked me out. It's very bureaucratic and they know nothing about HIV.

You do have to be an educator because they are contracted to do a job for Centrelink. They have no interest in the disease itself. I was the sixth interview for the day. She's just going through the motions of doing the interviews.

Richard: It's really going to depend on who you're sitting there facing isn't it? If they're empathic it's going to be so much easier. And some of them do seem pretty courteous but then some of them can be discourteous.

If you are feeling in any way anxious or nervous about the interview, ask someone to go with you who may be able to remind you of things you may otherwise forget to mention.



Above all it is important to remember, in any interaction with Centrelink, that you have rights (as well as responsibilities!) and these are described variously in the Centrelink Customer Charter and the Centrelink Appeals process.

Neil: There was something on the form I recall about extra space for the doctor to write something. So, I sat with my doctor and we talked for a few minutes about what we should write in that space. Just to provide extra information about HIV and the way it was affecting my life.

You've got to assume that they don't know and that they're going to take the official stance. For them, inevitably, your response turns into a tick or a cross on the form.

Final word: How can the process be changed?

Clients reflected on the importance of Centrelink providing information for people on what to expect in the review process. This information could be sent out with the initial forms.

They also found that the forms need more space. They do not allow room to elaborate on the complexity of HIV treatments side-effects and multiple diagnoses if necessary. You need to be prepared to talk about this at the interview. The forms are not "user friendly" and it can be hard to work out how best to answer some questions.

Ask someone to help you (eg BGF, CSN worker or ACON counsellor, your treating doctor or someone who has been through the review).

Peter: Well maybe we need to look at things that can help make the system easier for us. And that would be anything from creating a buddy program ...someone who could go to the interview with you.

Richard: A summary handed to you at the end of what we've gone over in the review, would be a fantastic thing. Maybe a checklist, for example, giving us a time frame. ...like they're going to write to you three weeks after the interview.

Tim: My review, from the day I got the letter saying I was going to be reviewed until I found out was six or seven weeks. It did impact upon my health. My viral load went up, my t-cells went down. I was sick. My health went substantially down.

John: We need support and information. Otherwise you feel like you're in the dark.

And even if I'm having a really lousy day I try to make it as nice and courteous and polite as I can. It makes a difference, it does.

Key points to remember in preparing for the DSP review interview:

- ▶ Consider all the health issues you have faced in the last five years that are directly related to HIV.
- ▶ The role of your GP is central in the review process. See your GP before you go for your interview so he/she can talk you through your health issues and if necessary give you notes and relevant copies of results to take with you.
- ▶ Highlight the side-effects of your HIV treatments as well as issues such as, depression, anxiety and disrupted sleep and include all other medication you may be taking.
- ▶ Consider yourself to be an “educator”. You have to describe in as much detail as you can the impact HIV has had on your life, as the interviewer will have no specialist knowledge of HIV, treatments and their side-effects.
- ▶ Write notes about all of the above and take them with you to the interview along with your doctor’s report so that you can refer to them if necessary during the interview.
- ▶ Write notes during the interview so that you have a record and you can refer to them later.
- ▶ If you are feeling in any way anxious or nervous about the interview, ask someone to go with you who may be able to remind you of things you may otherwise forget to mention.
- ▶ Get as much advice and information from PLWH/A (NSW), BGF, ACON or the Welfare Rights Centre (the contact details for these organisations are listed).
- ▶ If you disagree with any decision as a result of the review or are unhappy with any part of the process you have the right of appeal. You will need to lodge any complaint or appeal with Centrelink but you should also consider contacting the Welfare Rights Centre, as they will be able to offer good, practical advice.
- ▶ Keep photocopies of all letters, forms and information you have been sent.
- ▶ Send forms by registered mail. If you deliver your review records in person to Centrelink make sure you get a stamped copy for future reference.

Contact details for further information:

- **People Living with HIV/AIDS (NSW)**
A non-profit community organisation representing the interests of people living with HIV/AIDS in NSW. ☎ (02) 9361 6011 or Freecall 1800 245 677
- **Bobby Goldsmith Foundation (BGF)**
Positive Futures: Providing support and assistance to people living with HIV considering a return to work/study. ☎ (02) 9283 8666 or Freecall 1800 651 011 or visit www.bgf.org.au
- **AIDS Council of NSW (ACON)** A health promotion organisation based in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities with a central focus on HIV/AIDS. ☎ (02) 9206 2000 or Freecall 1800 063
- **Centrelink Information Line** ☎ 13 27 17
Mon–Fri 8.00am–5.00pm
- **Welfare Rights Centre** For information and representation on all social security matters. ☎ (02) 9211 5300 or Freecall 1800 226 028 or visit www.welfarerights.org.au
- **National Association of People Living With HIV/AIDS (NAPWA)** National peak organisation representing people living with HIV/AIDS. ☎ (02) 9557 8825 or Freecall 1800 259 666 or visit www.napwa.org.au

The following are some of the links to information that is available on the Centrelink website. It is worth checking these links because there is useful and important information there for all Centrelink customers. Above all it is important to remember, in any interaction with Centrelink, that you have rights (*as well as responsibilities!*) and these are described variously in the Centrelink Customer Charter and the Centrelink Appeals process.

If you do not have access to the internet, contact any of the organisations listed in this factsheet and they will be able to make this information available to you.

Centrelink Customer Charter

http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/about_us/customer_charter.htm/review

Your Rights as a Centrelink Customer

http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/legal/your_rights.htm

Appeals Process

http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/legal/review_appeal.htm

Feedback (complaints or suggestions) to Centrelink
[http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/filestores/co051_0403/\\$file/co051_0403en.pdf](http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/filestores/co051_0403/$file/co051_0403en.pdf)

Attending a Centrelink Review
[http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/MultiFilestores/com021_0410/\\$file/com021_0410en.pdf](http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/MultiFilestores/com021_0410/$file/com021_0410en.pdf)

General Information on the DSP
[http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/filestores/d001_0308/\\$file/d001_0308en.pdf](http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/filestores/d001_0308/$file/d001_0308en.pdf)

Centrelink Rate Estimator (work out your entitlements)
http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/online_services/index.htm

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