

# Blind Citizens News Spring 2024

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Blind Citizens Australia is the National representative organisation of people who are blind or vision impaired.  Our purpose is to inform, connect, and empower Australians who are blind or vision impaired and the broader community.

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### Other Publications

[New Horizons Radio Programme and Podcast](https://www.bca.org.au/new-horizons/)

[Blind Citizens Australia Annual Report](https://www.bca.org.au/reports/)

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## Editor's Note

Blind Citizens Australia refers to our members as people who are blind or vision impaired. However, we respect the right of individual authors to use whatever language is most comfortable for them.

## Editorial: A Year of Transformation – by Amila Dedovic

As we reflect on the milestones of 2024, this edition of BC News shines a spotlight on significant advancements in disability reform, illuminating the tireless efforts of advocates, innovators, and everyday heroes who strive for a more inclusive world. This year has marked a pivotal moment in our ongoing journey toward equality and accessibility, and the stories within these pages exemplify that progress.

We present a comprehensive overview of major disability reforms enacted throughout the year, illustrating how policy changes in Australia are reshaping the landscape for individuals with disabilities. We dive deep into these changes and what they mean for the rights of individuals, the effectiveness of support services, and the broader implications for inclusion in society.

In a deeply personal reflective piece, Fiona Woods, former President of Blind Citizens Australia, shares her journey and insights on the evolution of advocacy for the blind community. Her words serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of resilience, community, and the relentless pursuit of change.

Next year also brings a special celebration: Blind Citizens Australia will commemorate its 50th anniversary. To honour this momentous occasion, we are excited to announce that we will be publishing a special edition dedicated to celebrating this legacy. We invite our readers to share their suggestions on what they would like to see included in this edition, whether it be personal stories, reflections on the past, or visions for the future. Your input is invaluable as we commemorate this important chapter in our history.

As we embrace technological advancements, we explore the implications of artificial intelligence (AI) for individuals who are blind or vision impaired. This insight reveals both the potential and challenges of integrating technology into daily life, highlighting how these innovations can enhance independence while also emphasising the need for thoughtful implementation.

Our edition also features a heartwarming story about a cinema located in the inner Melbourne suburb of Elsternwick, where a vision-impaired duo encountered an unexpected hurdle when the audio description failed during a screening of *All Of Us Strangers*. The cinema's proactive response not only salvaged their experience but also reinforced the power of empathy and quick thinking in fostering inclusivity.

Finally, we celebrate a groundbreaking achievement in medical history: the world’s first eye transplant. This remarkable advancement opens new horizons for people facing vision loss, representing hope and possibility in the realm of medical science.

As we move forward, let us continue to advocate for change, share our stories, and support one another in building a future where every individual, regardless of ability, can thrive. Thank you for joining us on this journey of reflection and inspiration.

Enjoy this edition.

## Major Disability Reforms in 2024 - by Jackson Reynolds-Ryan

This year has seen the introduction of some big changes made across the disability sector by the Federal Government, with more on the way.

These changes have been driven by last year’s release of two major reports - the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, otherwise known as the Disability Royal Commission (DRC); and the Report of the Independent Review into the NDIS. These two massive areas of reform have spawned a number of other reports, working groups, and task forces to determine how implementation should proceed.

This article provides a summary of some of the changes that have taken place this year, and how we got here.

### NDIS Reforms

The Federal Government introduced legislation to begin the process of reform of the NDIS - in the form of the National Disability Insurance Scheme Amendment (Getting the NDIS Back on Track No. 1) Bill - in March this year. At the time we, along with many across the disability sector, expressed our disappointment that the government had not fulfilled its pledge to co-design NDIS reforms with the disability community. Consultation with the disability sector, where it occurred, was limited in time and scope.

The final version of the legislation, which included several amendments to the original Bill, was passed by both houses of Parliament in late August and received Royal Assent (sign-off from the Governor-General) on Thursday, 5th September. The legislation began to come into effect on Thursday, 3rd October 2024.

One of the major changes introduced by the Bill and recommended by the NDIS Review is to amend the Act so that participant needs will be assessed at a ‘whole-of-person’ level, rather than based on individual support items. This means NDIS budgets will be set at that whole-of-person level, rather than built line by line for each support need. Similarly, the effect of amendments in Section 34 is that ‘reasonable and necessary’ will refer to a participant’s plan as a whole rather than individual support items within a plan such as daily living care, therapy-based care, etc.

The original NDIS Act 2013 did not provide a clear definition of what a NDIS Support is. This has changed in the updated legislation, with a new section added (Section 10) aiming to provide clarity about what NDIS can and cannot be spent on. The legislation itself doesn’t actually go into detail about the specifics of what constitutes a NDIS Support, instead setting up a process by which the Federal Government will develop detailed rules in consultation with the State and Territory Governments. However, as those new rules will require unanimous sign off from all governments (which is likely to take significant time to come to agreement), the legislation also allows the Federal NDIS Minister to introduce ‘transitional’ rules, which can be put into effect without the approval of the States and Territory Governments.

The Government subsequently undertook a very short period of consultation before developing a transitional rule on what are (and are not) NDIS supports. While many of the items included in the lists of excluded supports - such as spending NDIS funds on drugs, gambling, etc. - are common sense and supported by the sector, BCA was concerned that the first draft of the transitional rule also included “standard household items (dishwasher, fridge, washing machine etc)” as well as “mobile phones, mobile phone accessories … and smart phones”. Given the very thin line between ‘mainstream’ smart devices and assistive technology that can significantly support the independence of a person who is blind or vision impaired, BCA opposed these inclusions. We have been encouraged therefore that in the final version of the transitional rule, which came into effect on Thursday, 3rd October 2024, these items have been re-categorised into a new group the government has called ‘Replacement Supports’. This will mean these items may be funded in place of an approved NDIS Support, if the participant can demonstrate it is related to their disability and provides better value for money.

The Final Report of the NDIS Review also included a recommendation for compulsory registration or enrolment of all NDIS providers and workers. This recommendation was framed as a way to improve visibility and regulation for all NDIS providers in a bid to improve safety for participants; however, many participants were concerned it would limit their ‘choice and control’ in decisions about how they received supports from, as well as concerns for market failure if providers chose to leave the Scheme.

In response, the government set up a Taskforce - chaired by disability rights lawyer and activist, Natalie Wade - to consult with participants, providers and the broader disability sector, and advise the government on the design and implementation of a new registration system.

After holding public consultations between February - June, the Taskforce found that the current registration system is not fit for purpose and that greater visibility is needed on who is provided NDIS Supports. However, the taskforce disagreed with the NDIS review that all providers should be registered, but said a new risk-proportionate model is needed and proposed the following categories of registration:

Advanced Registration for providers who offer high-risk supports such as behaviour support and services in high-risk / closed settings - such as group homes and supported employment.

General Registration for providers who offer medium-risk supports such as personal care, high intensity daily personal activities, community access and therapy where there is a lot of one-on-one contact with people. These supports are provided in the community or private settings, distinguishing them from Advanced Registration. The Taskforce anticipates this category will capture most of the current disability support services that are delivered in-home or in the community.

Self-Directed Support Registration for participants, their guardian or legal representative who contracts all their support directly. This includes direct employment, Services for One and independent contractors.

Basic Registration for providers who offer lower-risk supports - such as some sole traders or supports where social and community participation involves limited one-on-one contact with participants.

The Taskforce also proposes a fifth category where no registration is required. This is for goods bought from mainstream retailers, with visibility maintained through purchasing arrangements.

The Government has noted they are considering each of the recommendations contained in the final report from the Taskforce and will commence consultation on the development of a new model from October 2024.

Ultimately, the government has flagged that further reforms are coming to the NDIS, with a promise to work collaboratively with the sector to develop and implement the changes - a commitment BCA will continue to hold the government to account for.

### Disability Royal Commission

In late July, the Federal Government released its official response to the Disability Royal Commission (DRC), 10 months after the Final Report was handed down last September. The government responded to 172 of the 222 recommendations that were their primary or shared responsibility with the states and territories.

Of those recommendations, 13 were ‘accepted in full’ (meaning the government supported the recommendation in its entirety); while 117 were ‘accepted in principle’ (the government is supportive of the overarching policy intent but might consider different approaches to implementation). A further 36 recommendations have been flagged as ‘requiring further consideration’ (while the government awaits outcomes of related inquiries or other consultation), and six were ‘noted’ (neither accepted nor rejected because the government considers the recommendation to be outside their area of responsibility).

Some of the key recommendations the government ‘accepted in full’ include a plan to review and update Australia’s Disability Strategy (Rec. 5.2), refocused priorities for inclusion in the new Disability Employment Services model (Rec. 7.16), new education and training resources for Disability Employment Services staff (Rec. 7.17), and an ‘open employment first’ approach in the NDIS Participant Employment Strategy (Rec 7.29).

One of the most important areas of reform for people who are blind or vision impaired coming out of the DRC was ‘Recommendation 6.1’ - a National Plan to promote accessible information and communications’. The DRC recommended that the Australian Government work with the State and Territory governments to develop this plan, in co-design with people with disability and their representative organisations. The DRC recommended that the plan recognise the diversity of people with disability and the many formats and languages that people may require information to be provided in and should identify and allocate appropriate funding and resources for delivery.

The DRC envisioned that this Associated Plan would cover not only accessibility of communications technologies; but also ‘accessible information and communications for people with disability more broadly’, considered across a range of contexts, settings and situations. It would include how and when to provide material by means of Easy Read, Easy English, Auslan, live and closed captioning, braille or audio description, and digital accessibility - including compliance with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

The Australian Government has accepted Recommendation 6.1 ‘in principle’. They noted, in a joint statement with the States and Territories, that all governments support the development of an Associated Plan under Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021–31 to improve the accessibility of information and communications for people with disability; and committed to leading the development of the Associated Plan, building on existing initiatives to deliver a unified approach. Given the centrality of this recommendation too many of the challenges faced every day by people who are blind or vision impaired, BCA will continue to advocate strongly for this reform.

By contrast, the Federal Government chose to sidestep one of the most controversial recommendations of the DRC - the phasing out of segregated or special schools. The Commissioners were split over the right approach to inclusive education, with Commissioners Bennett, Galbally, and McEwin pushing to phase out special/segregated schools entirely (Rec 7.14), while Chair Sackville and Commissioners Mason and Ryan wanted to reform and improve these settings (Rec 7.15). The Federal Government's response argues that “State and Territory governments will continue to be responsible for making decisions about registration of schools in their jurisdictions”. They did however recognise “the ongoing role of specialist settings in service provision for students with disability and providing choice for students with disability and their families”. The federal government also ‘accepted in principle’ several other recommendations on inclusive education, including: ending exclusionary disciplinary practices, improving policies around reasonable adjustments, developing a roadmap towards inclusive education, and improving funding arrangements.

One of the most important and highly publicised areas of reform coming out of the final DRC report was the recommendation to legislate a new Disability Rights Act, which would give effect to Australia’s obligations under the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of People with Disability (UNCRPD). The report contained 22 recommendations (Recs 4.1 - 4.22) regarding the establishment of the new DRA; however the Australian Government has listed all of these as ‘subject to further consideration’ alongside the recent report by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights which recommended a Federal Human Rights Act. It also noted the steps it has already taken in enacting a new Disability Services and Inclusion Act (2023) to improve quality and safeguarding arrangements for people with disability outside the NDIS.

The DRC also made recommendations (Recs 4.23 - 4.34) regarding reform of the existing Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA). The Australian Government has accepted in principle all these recommendations and is dedicating $6.9 million to review and modernise the DDA.

This year has been a massive one for changes hitting the disability sector, and many participants are understandably feeling bewildered by the pace of reform. BCA will continue to break down reforms and recommendations in understandable ways for members, but we rely on your feedback and views to inform our feedback to government.

## Reflections On My Time as BCA President - by Fiona Woods

I was appointed President of BCA in December 2021. Having previously been Vice-President, I had been given the chance of acting in the role for a few months earlier that year. The role of President of a member-based organisation, such as BCA, is a challenging, complex and rewarding one. You are on the board of directors; you are the board Chair, and you represent and lead the members.

All directors owe their company a duty of due care and diligence. Discharging this duty has become increasingly onerous over the past ten years, although I surmise that many previous directors have made similar observations. Following recent legislation and case law, discharging this duty now extends to requiring a high degree of financial literacy, including reading, understanding and questioning financial documents and accounting standards, plus comprehension of risk as a concept that permeates all governance and cyber resilience. In addition to the customary personal liability if the company trades while insolvent, directors can now be personally penalised for failing to meet their positive duty to ensure a fair, safe and healthy workplace. The board is responsible for cultivating a socially responsible, sustainable and accountable corporate culture and much more. All these things are desirable, but the systems and processes that support them require knowledge, oversight and effective monitoring. Directors are entitled to seek advice from qualified third parties and to rely on it if they assess it as reasonable.

In addition to acting as a director, the President's role is to chair meetings, facilitating collective decision-making, and to approve minutes. One of my aims has been to develop a board where each director feels free to exercise their own judgment and to express their opinion so that a range of perspectives are considered before decisions are made. Perhaps all chairs aim for this, but it is easier said than achieved, given the range of information, personalities, emotions and issues involved and the time available at monthly meetings. It has been a source of delight to me to observe the increasing confidence and outspokenness of individual directors and the respect and curiosity with which alternative views have been received and considered by the board. As part of ensuring a cohesive relationship between the board and staff, the chair has a significant role in supporting and acting as a sounding-board for the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Sally Karandrews and I took office at around the same time and learned a lot of hard and rewarding lessons together. When Sally resigned as CEO to pursue her studies, it became my task to lead the search for a new CEO. After appointing Deb Deshayes, I had the pleasure of working with her as she familiarised herself with the role and developed her style as a CEO. In helping directors and CEOS  to give their best, there is a delicate balance to be struck between encouragement, empowerment and constructive challenge.

BCA's board is rare, even among disability organisations, in that all directors must be people who are blind or vision impaired. It is often assumed that people with leadership potential will acquire the necessary skills through experience or osmosis - through spending time with other leaders, but learning, often through mistakes, is a slow, painful and random way of gaining knowledge. This is why BCA developed its Executive Leadership Program, from which I had the pleasure of graduating. Australian Disability Network, together with Australian Institute of Company Directors, also realised that lived experience does not automatically impart the required skills and offered scholarships and mentoring for leaders with disability. I was one of several winners from among BCA members. This helped me to gain and share a deeper understanding of our board's role and obligations. It reassured me that BCA's governance is in good shape. With continuous learning and ingenuity among BCA's core values, I am confident the board will continue to strive to develop. I encourage all aspiring leaders reading this to seek out programs which can enhance their skills and understanding and expand the resources and networks available to them.

Beyond governance responsibilities, BCA's President's main role and the one which provided most highlights for me, is to represent the members. Due to COVID lockdowns and subsequent caution, plus the board's commitment to directing dwindling resources to where they can do the most good, there has been a lot less travel for the President in recent years. I enjoyed trips to visit BCA members in Launceston, Adelaide and Melbourne. Luckily for me, Sydney branch is within easy reach. I equally enjoyed connecting with members online. The meetings with members were among my most rewarding experiences.  I admit I approached some of them, such as the one regarding our recent reorganisation, with some trepidation, being uncertain of their outcomes. I have been buoyed by the attachment members almost always display for BCA and our mutual concern for it to thrive. It is not every company limited by guarantee that can attract over 50 members to its annual general meetings, especially in December. I drew encouragement from events with members, where not only do we hear from people who have always spoken at such events, and hopefully always will, but we also now hear from new voices and different perspectives.

Whatever our aspirations for BCA, we should start with the premise that we want BCA to be impactful now without compromising its ability to thrive in the future. Impact is difficult to measure. Advocacy wins are usually years in the making, as we have seen with audio description, or incremental and susceptible of being removed, as we have seen with accessible voting in NSW. I am reminded of one tiny win whenever I drive with a friend to our National Park. Thanks to BCA advocacy, my disability permit now entitles me to free entry, without needing to be attached to a specific vehicle.

When BCA started, people did not expect consumers who were blind to have a voice. What we talked about could be determined by BCA as directed by its members - pedestrian safety through audible traffic signals and tactile ground surface indicators, accessible public transport with audible announcements and clear signage, and the right to engage as a citizen, through voting, juries and access to information. As the voices of people with disability have become an expected part of many consultations and through purported co-design, the issues discussed are determined more by government and the broader disability sector than by people who are blind or vision impaired specifically. BCA is constantly required to respond to submissions about and to formulate positions on the NDIS, public transport, education, aviation, the budget and more. I am proud to say it is now accepted as essential that BCA's views are part of these discussions. Indeed, some of BCA's funding is conditional upon its participation.  The challenge for BCA is that there are decreasing resources to champion the issues which uniquely impact people who are blind or vision impaired, such as braille or orientation and mobility devices and programs. I know that these are the causes for which people join BCA and for which members and branches will continue to advocate. After many years of arguing for BCA's right to exist, it is now accepted as an integral element and leader of the blindness sector. A strong and united voice can achieve more than one single organisation and a focus of my leadership has been building collaborative relationships with a range of organisations within the sector.  Future boards and members may confront some difficult choices about BCA's priorities.

I have learned so much from my time as President. Many things I undertook for the first time: my first Strategic Plan, my first external audit and annual report, my first constitutional update, my first CEO recruitment and appointment. Of course, I would approach each of these differently another time. Among my proudest achievements in my time as a BCA leader have been the creation and adoption of the Blindness Service Provider Expectations Policy and the Healthcare Policy, and their memorable launch events, while I was chair of the then National Policy Council. As President, I was proud to lead a major update of BCA's constitution and to design more flexible branch by-laws. I supported our commitment to the Uluru Statement From the Heart and to our first Reconciliation Action Plan. Starting from my time as a director, BCA was advocated for the ideals and work of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of people with disabilities. I was grateful to be contracted to write a small number of BCA's many submissions. While I continue to hope for more tangible change to result from so many people telling their stories, BCA's work will stand as a testament to the experiences and aspirations of our members. I thank those of you who were with me along my leadership journey with BCA, including those who forced me to grow from the things I got wrong and those who celebrated with me the things we got right.

When I joined the board of BCA in 2017, there were six people living in my home, my eldest child had just begun her first permanent job. I was working out how to use my first NDIS plan and my first braille display that it had bought me. I used my phone for texts and occasional emails and had never opened the calendar. I had not installed any social media apps. I had never heard of Dropbox. Seven years later, there is just me and an adult child living here. I have no connection with schools, beyond living opposite one. I look at my phone calendar every morning and have had to buy extra capacity for Dropbox. I am connected with so many of you through Facebook and LinkedIn. My phone accompanies me everywhere. My family has expanded to welcome four partners and a grandchild. Throughout those seven years, especially in the last three and on an almost daily basis, the only constant has been issues related to BCA. Some issues were big, and some were small; some were expected, and some were a surprise; some of the surprises were good! All of them required me to exercise careful judgment, demanding a clear mind and focus. My strength came from the committed and passionate people I worked with and from my children and the many friends who have listened, counselled and encouraged me. Thank you!  I hope now to have more time to explore the beautiful place I call home.

The President of BCA is honoured to hold a leadership position. One thing I have learned to value is that we all lead differently. There are fierce advocates, ready to take on the world and damn the consequences. There are deep thinkers, who like to analyse all the options from all sides. There are curious questioners, who like to consider lots of possibilities, including the ones that have never been tried. In the speech I gave when I became President, I said that I could never have imagined that I would do so. I hope that some of you reading this are equally surprised to find yourselves one day heading Australia's national representative organisation of people who are blind or vision impaired. Don't be discouraged from putting yourself forward as a leader because you might not measure up to your own or others' idea of the type of person a leader should be. There is no ideal or perfect leader; each person deserves the space and grace to find their own way. Maybe you will discover you don't want to lead or maybe you'll discover it's your purpose in life. I thank each of you for allowing me the opportunity, the honour and the privilege of being your President. I look forward to supporting BCA's future leaders and direction, as an active member.

## Special Anniversary Issue of Blind Citizens News - by Lynne Davis

In June 1975 a meeting of blind people in Melbourne decided to form a new organisation which blind people around Australia could join by right, to adopt a constitution for such an organisation, and to call it the National Federation of Blind Citizens (NFBC). Next year the organisation - now called Blind Citizens Australia - will celebrate its 50th anniversary with a national convention in June and there will be many other celebratory events throughout the year. It will be a time to reflect on what the lives of blind people were like then, how their situation has changed and the role our organisation has played in that change, as well as looking forward to what may confront us in the future.

The next issue of Blind Citizens News will be a special anniversary issue, with a focus on five decades of advocacy, shared experiences, peer support and great change, as well as what current challenges face us and what our future might be like.

We invite you to send us your suggestions about what you would like to have included in the anniversary issue. Let us know in a few sentences about your ideas for this special issue. We can’t guarantee to include it all because the length is limited, but we’ll do our best. And if you are interested in writing for this issue, please let us know that as well.

We will need to hear from you by Friday, 13th December 2024.

Please send your suggestions to sivadal@bigpond.net.au, either in the body of your message or as a Word attachment to your message.

If you are not able to send it this way, call Amila Dedovic on 1800 033 660 to talk about how you might be able to submit your idea.

We are looking forward to hearing from you!

## A personal journey: From early tech to the future of AI – by Martin Stewart

As an advocate who constantly uses technology to work and play, I have had my attention drawn to the possibilities that artificial intelligence (AI) technology may or may not provide.

To answer this question for me, I become nostalgic thinking about my first digital device called The Parrot Voice Mate. Wow, when it was first handed to me, I was immediately fascinated by its ability to support my work and personal life. I simply asked it by using my voice for a relative’s phone number and it told me. Not only that, when I double-clicked its side button when close to my phone, it dialled their number for me. Even better, I could record my everyday activity notes which included shopping lists, work memos and so much more. I then realised that my digital revolution had begun.

With time I tentatively moved into the smart phone space with the purchase of an iPhone 6. Just before purchasing this phone, my son gave me all the encouragement that I needed when he said, “Dad I don’t know why you are buying this phone you will never get it”. To which I replied, “thanks for giving me the reason to take it on.” This comment was counteracted by a person who emailed me to say, “just take your time and you will be taken to places with this phone that you could never access before.”

I also recall hearing a radio program in 1978 in an interview about the development of futuristic digital radio technology. Given my love of creating my own weather forecasts, I was concerned to hear that these digital broadcasts would have such clear audio that it would end the static that could be heard when lightning strikes were happening. I remember thinking then, how was I going to know when a storm was approaching without these static noises? You may be interested to know that this is why I have kept three a.m. radios close at hand.

So, I ask myself and you, has digital technology delivered? Is our world more accessible? Are you able to easily use it? I feel for me the answer is found in what I can do now compared with before I purchased the Parrot and first iPhone. These devices began my ability to access people, places and spaces that I could never get to before. With digitalisation we can now text, talk and press play to access videos and broadcasts and interact with our friends, work colleagues and our world.

I know some of you will be thinking that digitalisation has had some negative impacts as some poor designs and developments have not considered us, leaving some workplaces and many other areas to be even less accessible than ever before. For example, recently when I flew with Delta Airlines to the United States, I was faced with what was described as their new modern onboard flight experience which included their exclusive inflight entertainment system. It was certainly a new experience for me as I was challenged by completely inaccessible entertainment technology. As well as not being able to press the call button and other buttons to operate doors, toilets and water taps. I could not even adjust my bed-seating position as these buttons were all operated from a touch screen without voice support.

And how can we forget the Commonwealth Bank’s touchscreen Albert EFTPOS device which meant we couldn’t purchase anything without revealing our pin number to a stranger.

Also, we know that face recognition technology was initially developed without diversity in mind – meaning that people with some darker skin colour tones, and those who use prosthetic eyes, were not able to be identified when using this technology. I am sure most of you will have other stories like these.

This is why we continue to advocate for co-designing practices based upon inclusivity which should involve us in consultation before and not after procurement. Such advocacy supports the creation of technology which is not only accessible but also usable for all.

In everyday life you will now hear these words Co-pilot, Bing, Perplexity, Gemini, ChatGPT and more. These are the names of the newly arrived AI systems. We know this technology is promising a revolutionary change, causing some of us trepidation and others excitement. I always gravitate towards positivity but with a realistic view that there will be challenges with these platforms with plenty of work to do to address them. I have acquired all of these systems so that I can thoroughly test them and offer feedback to the developers. So far, I have experienced the good, the not so good and everything in between. I can verbally converse with some and text with all of them. I can identify one very clear positive - we can access information that often would be hidden away in previously inaccessible websites. This information ranges from the simplest to the more complex enquiries. With optimism I believe just like with digitalisation that as this technology evolves, so will its accuracy and usability.

Imaginings may now be realised. For example, will we experience live sports, theatre and concerts with AI-driven embedded descriptions?

Could we have a restaurant’s menu with adjustable font sizing and customisable colour contrasting be audibly read out in any language? Will we have much smarter wearable technology which efficiently informs us of our world as we move about in it?

Here we are in late 2024 when AI technology has arrived. I feel that we can move forward with positivity to engage with it to experience more work and social inclusion, and therefore an upgraded quality of our living experiences.

I hope this sparks your imagination which now may become your future.

So, what does AI technology mean to you?

## The Joy of It - by Robyn McKenzie

Classic Cinema, Gordon Street, Elsternwick, Victoria

Dear Manager,

Just thought I’d send you a quick note to let you know how important you have become to me. Our relationship has ramped up a bit this year. I hope you have been enjoying the extra time we are spending together as much as me. We began our first correspondence back in February. My friend Joy and I dropped by to see the movie *All Of Us Strangers*. Remember Joy? We love seeing films together. We have a similar taste in cinema and love to go to lunch afterwards to discuss the plot, the actors and the cultural references.  We had three films in mind to see, back on that day in February, but I was happy to see whichever one was available audio described.

Emma, our server at the ticket counter, said that all the cinemas were AD capable so we could see any movie we chose. She understood the difference between AD and captioning. This pleased me greatly because so many cinema staff confuse captioning for people who are deaf with audio description where the action on the screen is narrated via a separate audio track for people who are blind or vision impaired. All Of Us Strangers was our first choice. So, Joy and I were very pleased to buy our tickets for the 10:00am screening. As she handed over the audio description headset, Emma told me to let her know if there were any problems with the headset or the AD. I suggested that it might be better if she popped into the cinema about five minutes into the movie starting so that she could check if everything was working okay. This was my preferred option because on previous occasions, when the AD track or the AD headset wasn’t working, I would miss the first 20 minutes or so of the movie while I popped out of the cinema, waited in line again and reported the problem.

As you are now aware, unfortunately the AD didn’t work. Jem, I assume Emma delegated the task to him, came into the cinema with an extra headset. He confirmed that the AD track wasn’t running. Given that Joy and I were the only people in the cinema, he paused the movie while he tried out some strategies. This is the benefit of having a preference for seeing movies early in the day. He popped in and out a few times to check if the AD headset was working in other cinemas. Fortunately, Joy and I love a chat, so we were content to sit there waiting for the situation to be rectified.

Unfortunately, the problem couldn’t be fixed so Jem pressed play on the movie, and we watched it without AD. This process took about one hour. Joy commented that it was most unfortunate that the movie was paused on a shot of leftovers in Andrew Scott’s fridge. She would have much preferred looking at a frozen image of his face or perhaps even his butt! I was very impressed with Jem’s attempts to fix the situation. He apologised for the inconvenience and gave us a free pass for our next visit to the Classic. He said he will raise the matter with his manager. He believed the problem was something to do with the transmitter.

Joy and I have visited you and seen several fabulous movies since that day. You took the time to investigate the matter. It turned out that something was wrong with the transmitter. Given that nobody had complained up until then, the problem had not been identified. I was impressed with the way you kept in touch with me to explain the technical issues. You also explained that cinemas 5 and 8 are still not audio description capable because they operate on a different system, and it is currently too expensive to rectify. You have been very understanding when the movies I want to see all seem to be scheduled in cinemas 5 and 8. And I have been grateful when you have given me free tickets when the AD hasn’t worked.

We eventually got to see *All Of Us Strangers* again but this time with AD. The movie was screened in cinema 9. I don’t know if you scheduled the movie on a different screen as a result of me cheekily requesting a change of screen. Perhaps movies, as they near the end of their run, are moved into different cinemas. Either way, I finally got to see it audio described. And this time, I was able to point out to Joy some of the visual references in the film that she missed!

I am looking forward to spending much more time with you.

Kind regards,

Robyn.

## World’s First Eye Transplant Was A Giant Leap Forward – but vision remains elusive – by Adam Taylor

### Professor and Director of the Clinical Anatomy Learning Centre, Lancaster University.

Three years ago, Aaron James, a utility lineman, lost half of his face and his arm when he was struck by a high-voltage electrical cable.

Last year, the 47-year-old received a face and whole-eye transplant – the first of its kind. The surgery took 21 hours and involved 140 healthcare professionals.

James is making remarkable progress, as recently reported in Jama, a medical journal. Although he cannot see out of the transplanted eye, it continues to maintain normal pressure and blood flow – and it hasn’t shrunk (something that happened when eye transplants were previously attempted in animals). Doctors said the surgery laid the “foundation for further advancements and ongoing research”.

While face transplants have been done previously, they have only a relatively recent entry into surgical history with the first partial transplant occurring in 2005 and the first full transplant in 2010. As of September 2023, 50 of these surgeries have been undertaken, globally.

Tens of thousands of corneal transplants – partial eye transplants – are done every year. But this is a much more straightforward operation.

### Why can’t eyes be easily transplanted?

For a start, eyes are held in place by many strap-like muscles that help to move the eye around, and myriad small blood vessels keep the muscles and tissues of the eye alive. There is also a second far more complex reason eyes are difficult to transplant: the optic nerve.

The optic nerve carries electrical information to the visual cortex of the brain. This nerve is an extension of the central nervous system, so taking one eye and its associated nerve and trying to connect it to another brain is not straightforward.

To put it in numbers, it would probably be the most difficult rewiring job anyone had ever undertaken because about 1.2 million nerve cells contribute to the optic nerve. Matching up each of these to the relevant optic nerve and visual cortex of the brain of another person is almost impossible, especially because there are probably differences in the exact number of nerves contributing to the nerve from person to person. Each nerve is responsible for a small area of what you see, mapping to a specific area in the brain.

This incoming light energy triggers a biochemical cascade to convert it into electrical energy by the photoreceptor cells in the retina. The electrical energy is transported to the back of the brain and built into an image that we see.

To add to this complexity, some light information from each eye ends up on the opposite side of the brain to help build a complete picture. And information is cast into your eye upside down, so the brain fixes that too by working with the vestibular system (a system in the inner ear that provides balance and sense of orientation) so that we interpret everything the right way up.

The retinal cells inside the eye are also another complicating factor. They are incredibly delicate and require a constant blood supply. Without the oxygen it brings, they die in as little as 12 minutes. To solve this issue, the surgeons who operated on James ensured the blood supply to the donated eye was maintained.

### What about nerve repair or regrowth?

There are considered to be two nervous systems in our body: the central nervous system, which encompasses the brain, spinal cord including the retina of the eye, and the peripheral nervous system, which is pretty much everything else.

It is well known that nerves in the central nervous system have a very limited ability to repair. There is lots of evidence of this from millions of people who have had traumatic eye injuries, where the retina has been damaged and resulted in vision loss.

### Might we eventually be able to restore vision?

It’s difficult to say. However, there are interesting studies in animals that suggest that reactivating embryonic signalling pathways, is the process that drives stem cells in our body as we develop to become different cells of the body (in this case, retinal cells) might help repair nerves. Other vertebrates, such as newts and zebrafish, are able to repair their retina, even following significant damage.

Stem cells have shown amazing results in repairing blindness caused by damage to the outside layer (the cornea) of the eye, particularly where a person has damaged one eye. Stem cells from the healthy eye can be removed, grown in a lab and then transferred to the injured eye to repopulate and repair the damaged cornea, restoring functionality.

Where both eyes are injured, donor stem cells from the eye of a fresh cadaver may be used. But the recipient needs to take immunosuppressant drugs for the rest of their life. This can cause complications, such as increasing the risk of viral, bacterial or fungal infections.

As for James, the retinal cells of his transplanted eye respond to light and information is being processed along the visual pathway. Unfortunately, this doesn’t translate to vision – but then, that was never the expectation.

So when it comes to whole-eye transplantation, progress is being made, but there are still significant difficulties to overcome. This procedure, however, is another milestone in the remarkable journey of one man and another milestone in the surgical achievements of transplantation.

## Feedback for BCA

Do you have any compliments, suggestions or concerns you wanted to let BCA know about? You can do this anonymously by going to our website [www.bca.org.au/feedback](http://www.bca.org.au/feedback) and completing a feedback form or you can call the BCA Office toll free on 1800 033 660. Your feedback will be used to improve our services to better meet the needs of our membership.

## How to Make a Complaint About BCA

Any member, client, volunteer, or their advocate, can lodge a complaint about the services provided by BCA. Complaints can be made in the following ways:

Phone: 1800 033 660  
Email: [bca@bca.org.au](mailto:bca@bca.org.au)  
Website: www.bca.org.au/feedback

Post: Blind Citizens Australia, Level 3, Ross House  
247 – 251 Flinders Lane, Melbourne, Vic 3000

If there are complaints of a serious nature, the Chief Executive Officer will ask that the complaint be put in writing.

Complaints will be recorded in accordance with the requirements for complaints management outlined by The Office of Disability Services Commissioner. Member and client privacy will be respected and protected in relation to the recording, management and resolution of the complaint. For a full copy of BCA's complaints policy, please go to our website [www.bca.org.au/feedback](http://www.bca.org.au/feedback) or call BCA.

## Funding and Donations for BCA

BCA would like to acknowledge the generous work of the Jeffrey Blyth Foundation. The Foundation was formed in 1995 with BCA being the primary beneficiary. And the Shirley Fund, which now sits with the Jeffrey Blyth Foundation following the merger of BCNSW with BCA.

We would also like to acknowledge our funding partners: the Federal Department of Social Services (DSS), the National Disability Insurance Agency, the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) NSW; the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) Victoria, DSS via the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO), Vision Australia, Guide Dogs Australia, EverAbility, and our generous members and BCA Backers.

If you would like to make a donation to Blind Citizens Australia, you can call 1800 033 660 and use your credit card. You can also donate online <https://www.givenow.com.au/blindcitizensaustralia>. All donations over $2 are tax deductible.

## Submit Your Writing to Blind Citizens News

The Editor welcomes your submissions for Blind Citizens News. Submissions for the next special edition for our 50th Anniversary close on Friday 13th December 2024. Please see the earlier article for details of what and where to send contributions. Contributions can be submitted in braille, print, audio CD or electronic format (in Word or text format). For all other format contributions, please send the document to the BCA Office or phone 1800 033 660 for enquiries. Submissions should be between 500 and 1200 words in length. Submissions cannot be made anonymously, and the Editor must be made aware of any conflict of interest which may be relevant to the author's work.

## New Horizons Radio Broadcast Schedule

### South Australia

Adelaide, 5RPH 1197AM and on RPH Adelaide digital

Times: 4.30pm Wednesday; Repeated 8.15am Sunday

### Queensland

Brisbane, Reading Radio 1296AM

(Can also be heard on DAB Radio station and IHeartradio, Community Radio Plus, 4RPH and TuneInRadio apps – details found at <https://readingradio.org.au/>

Times: 2.00pm Fridays. Repeated Friday 11.45pm and Saturday 4.45pm

### NSW and ACT

Sydney, 2RPH 1224AM, Sydney East 100.5FM

Newcastle/Lower Hunter 100.5FM

Times: 3.15pm Friday; Repeated Saturday 2.00pm

Canberra, 1RPH 1125AM, Wagga Wagga 89.5FM, Junee 99.5FM

Times: Tuesday 9.15am: Repeated 8.00pm Tuesday, 9.30am Saturday.

### Northern Territory

Darwin VAR digital service (DAB+) and the Darwin web streaming service. Times: 4.30pm Wednesday; Repeated 8.15am Sunday.

### Tasmania

Hobart Print Radio Tasmania 864AM, Launceston 106.9FM, Devonport 96.1FM

Week 1 Times: 3.45pm Wednesday, repeated 8.45am Friday

Week 2 Times: 3.45pm Wednesday, repeated 8.45am Friday

### Victoria

Melbourne, 3RPH 1179AM and Vision Australia Radio regional stations; RPH Albury 101.7FM, RPH Bendigo 88.7FM, RPH Geelong 99.5FM, RPH Mildura 107.5FM, RPH Shepparton 100.1FM, RPH Warragul 93.5FM, RPH Warrnambool 882AM

Times: 4.30pm Wednesday; Repeated 6.30pm Sunday.

### Western Australia

Perth, 6RPH 990AM

Times: 4.30pm Wednesday: Repeated 6.30pm Sunday.