

Printed August 19, 2008 08:23am AEST

## Alert over ADHD guidelines in schools

Justine Ferrari, Education writer | August 19, 2008

**GUIDELINES for managing attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder have alarmed leading education researchers, who warn they will cause an exponential increase in children being labelled as having ADHD by schools chasing funding.**

A group of 14 researchers in education, disabilities and ADHD from seven universities have written to the Rudd Government, criticising moves to instruct teachers to look out for ADHD and to allocate special funding to schools for students with the disorder.

The guidelines are being reviewed by the Royal Australasian College of Physicians at the request of the National Health and Medical Research Council. Draft recommendations were released for public comment.

In a letter to Education Minister Julia Gillard and Health Minister Nicola Roxon, the researchers say the recommendations will encourage over-diagnosis of ADHD and give schools an incentive to have children classified with the disorder to gain access to extra money.

The letter cites the experience in the US, where after ADHD cases made schools eligible for special support, the number of public school students categorised with a health impairment grew by 600 per cent in 10 years.

Training teachers to look for disorders could cause them to miss signs indicating other difficulties at home or with learning, the researchers say.

"(It) also exacerbates the risk that children with learning difficulties and poor social skills will be diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder that may remain with them for the rest of their lives," the letter says.

"This risk is particularly acute for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds."

A survey of children's mental health, conducted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in 1998, found almost 8 per cent of 12- to 17-year-olds were diagnosed with ADHD.

A study of South Australian children taking medication for ADHD in 1999 found rates highest among children from families with low incomes and high unemployment.

The lead signatory on the letter, Linda Graham from the University of Sydney, said yesterday resources would be better spent on giving teachers the skills and support to deal with a variety of children's behaviours rather than singling out disorders.

Dr Graham said diagnosing a child as having ADHD was sometimes medicalising normal behaviour and should be a last resort, but it had become the first step in dealing with challenging children. "The diagnostic criteria for ADHD over the past 15 years has been expanding and it's now almost possible to diagnose one of my cats," she said.

The chairman of the group writing the guidelines, David Forbes, said between 5 and 10 per cent of children had the features of ADHD and might need special intervention to help them learn at school. He disagreed that training teachers to recognise ADHD would increase diagnosis of the disorder.

---

*Copyright 2008 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +10).*