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Assistive Technology Suppliers Australasia Inc

### **Internet Buyers Beware says Disability Equipment Association**

The Assistive Technology Suppliers Association (ATSA) says people should fully understand the risks of buying equipment over the internet before making a purchase.

The warning comes after recent media reports claiming that Australian suppliers are profiteering on aids and equipment for people with a disability.

The executive director of ATSA Chris Sparks rejected the claims there was profiteering when the cost of Australian products was compared with US internet pricing.

“Our organisation was established in August 2000 and has extensive knowledge of the supply/value chain of assistive technology (AT) to Australians with disability,” Mr Sparks said.

“There is a real risk to Australians with a disability, their carers and families when complex AT is sourced over the internet without qualified advice and the opportunity for a detailed assessment,” he said.

“It is a fact that prices on US websites are sometimes significantly cheaper than in most other world markets including Australia.

“Investigations have shown that AT products in Australia are generally lower cost than comparable markets including Canada, New Zealand, UK and most of Europe.

“However, the US internet sites work on a cash up front, no pre or after sales service model. In general the old adage applies that you get what you pay for,” he said.

“These sites can work well for very basic products and for very experienced consumers. However they are a minefield when it comes to sourcing more involved products or for those consumers with complex needs.

“Typical examples include wheelchairs arriving with a base only and no seating, products unsuited to the individual’s requirements that exacerbate the disability.

“There is one AT product that has had significant investigation regarding safety, including online sales and that is mobility scooters.

“These are considered by the industry to be a basic product.”

Mr Sparks said the ACCC and various state and commonwealth departments investigated these products and it is worth noting that the ACCC is very concerned about the safety issues related to online retailers of powered mobility scooters and recommends against that avenue of supply.

Mr Sparks said it should be remembered this is for a basic product.

The typical process for sourcing AT for people with disability is best depicted as high service and high cost, and involves a number of important steps not performed by internet sellers:

- Initial discussions, often in conjunction with an occupational therapist, to determine the consumer’s basic requirements.

- Sourcing and investment in trial equipment.
- Setup of trial equipment prior to visiting the consumer.
- Physical trialling of a range of equipment options with the consumer, often in their home.
- Determination of individual equipment specifications.
- Extended loan of trial equipment to guarantee suitability.
- Preparation of a formal quotation.
- Delivery and customisation of the final AT solution.
- Training of the consumer and their care givers.
- Post sales service and warranty support.
- Supply of spare parts and accessories for the reasonable life of the equipment.

Mr Sparks said in many instances, funding delays mean that the entire assessment process has to be repeated adding further cost.

“You wouldn’t buy a pair of glasses without getting your eyes tested – the same applies for most equipment for people with disability.

“Suppliers also provide free equipment to Independent Living Centres and major institutions across Australia and facilitate training and education of occupational therapists and other allied health professionals,” he said.

Mr Sparks said that ATSA had been working closely with government and key stakeholders to ensure clients got the best possible service.

“We will continue to offer whatever assistance is necessary,” he said.

He said ATSA has pioneered an industry Code of Practice to ensure that our members conduct themselves at all times with the interests of the consumer being paramount.

A copy of the Code can be downloaded from [www.atsa.org.au](http://www.atsa.org.au).

More information, contact Chris Sparks 02 9893-1883.