



17 November 2017

For immediate release

Media release: Free health screenings address poor health of people with intellectual disabilities

More than 1200 athletes with intellectual disabilities from around the country will receive free ear, eye, feet and teeth checks at the Special Olympics New Zealand National Summer Games 2017.

Over seventy volunteer clinicians and students from health professions will screen the athletes, looking to identify previously undetected health issues that are common among people with intellectual disabilities. For the first time in New Zealand the eye screenings will include a specialist check for Keratoconus - an eye condition causing vision problems that is more common in people with Downs Syndrome than in the general population.

Dr Jeanine Doherty, Audiologist and Special Olympics New Zealand Board Trustee, says that “people with intellectual disabilities typically have poorer health status than the general public – in part because they may not be able to voice their symptoms and concerns to others, or because the health system does not delve hard enough to find unmet needs.”

Worldwide Special Olympics has almost five million athletes active in over 170 countries. In 2016 it was found that of the almost 156,000 athletes screened:-

- 47% had toenail and foot issues
- 40% had untreated tooth decay
- 40% needed a prescription for spectacles
- 20% had permanent hearing loss requiring hearing help.

Dr Doherty says New Zealand figures are often higher than these world averages and that should be a concern for us all.

“The data we gather will be used in writing evidence-based research papers, which will be shared with government health policy officials and care agencies. This will hopefully help gain better access to, and care by, our health services for all persons with intellectual disability.”

Special Olympics New Zealand holds Healthy Athletes Programme screenings at its National Summer Games every four years. Screenings began in New Zealand in 1997 – and currently include Fit Feet (podiatry), Healthy Hearing (audiology), Opening Eyes (optometry) and Special Smiles (dentistry).

Special Olympics New Zealand

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Created by the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation. Authorised and accredited by Special Olympics, Inc for the benefit of persons with intellectual disabilities.

The Special Olympics National Summer Games are being held in Wellington from 27 November to 1 December 2017. This Games is New Zealand's largest event for persons with intellectual disability and will see 1300 athletes of all ages compete in swimming, athletics, basketball, bocce, equestrian, football, golf, indoor bowls, powerlifting, table tennis and tenpin bowling.

For more about the Games visit www.specialolympics.org.nz

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Editor's notes:

About Special Olympics New Zealand

Special Olympics New Zealand is a year-round programme of sports training and competition for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. More than 7000 athletes throughout the country train and compete in 13 different Olympic-type summer and winter sports.

Special Olympics New Zealand also offers athletes leadership development through its Athlete Leadership Programme, health screening via Healthy Athletes[®], and encourages social inclusion through Unified Sports[®], where intellectually disabled athletes are combined in teams with unified partners (without intellectual disabilities).

Founded in 1968 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Special Olympics provides athletes continuing opportunities to develop fitness, demonstrate courage and experience joy as they participate in the sharing of gifts and friendship with other athletes, their families and the community.

Special Olympics New Zealand – www.specialolympics.org.nz

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