*CANBERRA BLIND SOCIETY (CBS)*

*May 2021 Newsletter* 428

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# Notice Board

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| **May 2021** | | | | | |
| 5 May | First Wednesday | 10:00 | | | Audio Book Club |
| 6 May  13 May  20 May  27 May | Thursdays | | 9:30 | Braille Group | |
| 12 May  26 May | Second and Fourth Wednesday | 10:00 | | | Arts and Crafts |
| 21 May | Third Friday | 10:00 | | | Sense-Able Cooking |
| **June 2021** | | | | | |
| 2 June | First Wednesday | 10:00 | | | Audio Book Club |
| 3 June  10 June  17 June  24 June | Thursdays | | 9:30 | Braille Group | |
| 9 June  23 June | Second and Fourth Wednesday | 10:00 | | | Arts and Crafts |
| 18 June | Third Friday | | 10:00 | Sense-Able Cooking | |
| **July 2021** | | | | | |
| 7 July | First Wednesday | 10:00 | | | Audio Book Club |
| 1 July  8 July  15 July  22 July  29 July | Thursday | | 9:30 | Braille Group | |
| 14 July  28 July | Second and Fourth Wednesday | 10:00 | | | Arts and Crafts |
| 16 July | Third Friday | 10:00 | | | Sense-Able Cooking |

# From the President’s Chair – Peter Granleese

It seems but yesterday when I sat down to write my column in the April 2020 edition of the Newsletter, where I announced that following Federal, State and Territory Governments advice, CBS would be closing its office for all face to face contact until further notice, due to the COVID-19 virus. Never before in the history of CBS since its humble beginnings in 1958, has it shut its doors and ceased providing services. Somehow through the good times and bad, and there have been some bad times over the last 63 years, CBS always remained open and continued to serve the Canberra community through an ever-increasing range of services.

As we faced the challenges imposed by COVID-19, our focus was clear, to assist our community in any way we could. The welfare and safety of our members and volunteers was our priority. With this in mind, CBS remained open for business as a virtual rather than a physical presence until October when the easing of restrictions relating to social distancing allowed some face to face contact.

The lockdown has affected CBS in other ways besides the disruption to existing services. Most notably, it has disrupted our plans to expand the Society’s services by the appointment of a social worker to run an Outreach Program providing information and assessments, counselling and referrals as well as training in daily living skills and ongoing support for individuals with changing needs. It was hoped that a suitable person would be appointed to the position by August 2020, but this has not happened because of the COVID virus and shortage of qualified people due to the increased demand caused by the introduction of the NDIS. We have been actively recruiting since November and are following up a couple of leads in the hope that the position will be filled by the beginning of July.

During the lockdown period, CBS continued to develop its infrastructure as part of a project funded by the National Disability Insurance Authority (NDIA) that would train vision impaired volunteers to take on leadership roles in all aspects of the running of CBS. To date, four workshops have been run for these volunteers, as well as two workshops conducted by Guide Dogs NSW and ACT to train volunteers as sighted guides.

CBS also produced its first Three Year Strategic Plan for many years which will define the Society’s future direction as it emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Strategic Plan commenced in July 2020 and a copy has been placed on the Society’s website.

With the past year behind us and the further easing of restrictions, CBS is on track and ready once again to increase services. The Outreach Program which will eventually include a rehabilitation component, will be the centrepiece.

Plans to increase the range of group activities facilitated by the Society’s vision impaired volunteers, is also back on track. On 28 April, the first meeting of the Arts and Crafts group met in the training room at CBS. The Training Room accommodates up to ten people for this activity and with seven participants joining the group so far, there are still three vacant spots for anyone interested in joining.

The Arts and Crafts Group meets at CBS from 10:00 am to 12:00 pm on the second and fourth Wednesday of each month. If you are interested in joining the group, let us know at CBS and we will add you to the circulation list.

The first meeting of the bi-monthly discussion group will take place in the CBS training room at 10:00 am until 12:00 pm on Friday 28 May 2021. This being the first meeting, no topic for discussion has yet been decided. Like all other group activities, it will be up to the group themselves, to decide what topics they wish to discuss.

It is also proposed that the excursion group will be run on the alternative fourth Friday of each month. No decision has yet been made as to the possible destination for the excursion. We are looking for suggestions and will make a decision shortly. The first excursion will be on Friday 25 June 2021. If you are interested in either of these activities, please contact us at CBS. More information about these and other group activities being considered will be published in subsequent issues of the Newsletter. Watch this space.

# The Way I see It – Graham Downie

Returning the use of Canberra’s public transport to at least its pre-pandemic level will require more than vaccination against COVID-19.

Without doubt, the virus was the major cause of an 87 per cent loss of patronage for the already struggling transport provider. It has never managed more than about nine per cent of daily journeys in this car-obsessed city and the droves who have deserted public transport since March last year are unlikely to return unless the entire government approach to providing this important service changes.

At a recent forum, ACT Transport Minister Chris Steel said there was a compelling case to expand light rail before the pandemic. “There is now an even greater case to expand it, as we seek to rebuild Canberra’s public transport network in the future and attract more people on board,” he said. But there is no independent business case to support spending several billion dollars extending the light rail to Woden while many Canberra suburbs have meandering bus routes which make private car travel far more appealing.

At the forum, Mr Steel said, “rethinking assumptions about how people move around, to prioritise public transport and active travel is an important part of bringing town centres and local hubs to life.”

In which case, why has the public transport network, since the introduction of light rail, required many one, and even two changes to complete journeys previously completed by one bus, resulting in significantly longer travel times? On weekends, except for the rapid routes, most hourly bus services have been reduced to two-hourly, making weekend bus travel effectively unworkable for most residents.

The ACT government once had a policy of bus routes giving priority to local shopping centres. But with the introduction of the tram, folk who shop at Lyneham have to lug their goods two blocks if using route 50 to get home. This change was to encourage people east of the shops to use the tram. Kaleen and Giralang residents, who for many years could catch a direct bus to Civic, must now change to the tram at Dickson. Predictably, bus use from those suburbs declined well before COVID-19. Then, there is the disgraceful route 56 between Civic and Fyshwick, which meanders through Kingston, Manuka, Red Hill and Narrabundah, before, after more than 40 minutes, begins depositing workers around the sprawling industrial suburb.

These are only a few examples of Canberra’s out-of-touch government-directed transport planning system, which is prepared to spend several billions of dollars on light rail while effectively discouraging the use of public transport by those for whom bus is their only public transport option.

At the forum, attended by fewer than 40 people, indicating the general lack of interest in this essential service, there was some reason for optimism, particularly for people who are blind or vision impaired. Mr Steel said future focus would be to ensure the system worked for all people, including the most vulnerable. A new accessibility reference group had been established in Transport and City Services to ensure the needs of people with a disability, older Canberrans and children and families were fully met.

More information has been sought on this reference group but at time of writing, my call to Mr Steel’s office has not been returned. Be assured, the matter will be pursued.

Mr Steel told the forum that before the pandemic struck Australia in 2020, public transport in Canberra was making great strides with a 10 per cent increase in average daily journeys in the ACT, compared to the same period in 2019. Following government advice for people to “reconsider” their use of public transport, journeys on the bus and light rail network fell by about 87 per cent. Revenue from fares fell by about 40 per cent, $9.3 million in the financial year.

To its credit, the ACT responded with planned frequency increases, instead of service reductions which had occurred in some other jurisdictions.

Mr Steel said public transport patronage now in Canberra was down by almost 27 per cent and traffic congestion had increased with the Northbourne Avenue corridor more than 20 per cent higher than in December 2019. Despite Canberra’s being almost free of the virus, public health advice was still for people to avoid public transport in peak hours.

Understating the position, Mr Steel said, “Clearly, we have a long road ahead of us.” Perhaps in a year from now, or even longer, people might be fully welcomed back to Canberra’s public transport.

Welcomed we might be, but except for people for whom public transport is effectively their only choice for their primary method of travel, the majority will not use a largely fragmented, time-consuming means of travel.

# Vale - Chase Richardson

With great sadness, we advise Chase Richardson, instructor with Guide Dogs in Canberra, died recently.

Aged only 38, he was on holiday when he died suddenly. CBS extends condolences to his work colleagues and family.

At time of writing, no information was available from Guide Dogs about funeral arrangements.

# Vale - Clifford Spencer

Clifford Spencer, who enjoyed several CBS Christmas parties, died in Canberra on April 28, aged 100.

Mr Clifford moved to Canberra from Adelaide seven years ago. His daughter, Charmaine Hallam, told CBS her father had turned 100 on February 14 this year and was able to enjoy a very special birthday celebration at Goodwin Ainslie Retirement Village where he lived in an independent unit.

“We were very grateful for the support he received from the Canberra Blind Society,” his daughter said.

Mr Clifford’s funeral will begin at 3pm on Wednesday, May 5 at Norwood Park Crematorium.

# Tech Updates – Development of a new type of retinal implant

A team of researchers from the Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne has developed a retinal implant that transposes images acquired by camera-equipped smart glasses into a simplified, black and white image made from 10,500 pixels.

**Who are the implants for and what has been the issue with current retinal implants?**

For many patients with retinitis pigmentosa – an inherited disease where progressive loss of retinal photoreceptors eventually leads to blindness – current retinal implants do not provide clear benefits. In fact, three years after surgery, most patients have stopped using them.

Two limiting parameters are often cited as the reason for the interruption: a small field vision angle (usually limited to 20°) and coarse visual resolution (less than 100 pixels in the most commonly used implant). These require the patient to constantly scan their environment to recreate a mental map of their surroundings, which is impractical and cognitively exhausting.

**What is the new implant called?**

To tackle these limitations, Diego Ghezzi and his team developed POLYRETINA, a wide-field high-density epiretinal prosthesis that can be implanted at the back of the retina, close to the optic nerve. The implant contains 10,498 photovoltaic pixels (80-µm diameter, 120-µm pitch) distributed in a tiled fashion over a 13 mm-diameter active area, and provides a 43° vision angle.

**How does the POLYRETINA prosthesis work?**

A camera embedded in the smart glasses captures images in the wearer’s field-of-vision and sends the data to a microcomputer placed in one of the glasses’ end-pieces. The data are then turned into light signals that are transmitted to the 10,498 electrodes of the retinal implants, creating a star-spangled-sky-like version of the image.

**What testing has been done while waiting for human trials?**

The team conducted a battery of tests to ensure that the implant was fit for purpose. Combining conjugated polymers and less rigid substrates, for example, allowed for a wider coverage of the retinal surface. However, the main question was how many electrodes the prosthesis should contain: a small number would not significantly improve resolution compared with existing implants; a large number increases risks of crosstalk with neighbouring pixels.

By firing combinations of pixels of increasing pattern complexity, the researchers confirmed that even when using 10,498 electrodes, the voltage generated by each pixel is sharply discriminated from its neighbouring pixels and does not show a voltage summation effect. This was observed even in the most extremes cases where a central pixel is off while the surrounding eighteen pixels are on.

The researchers performed further experiments ex vivo on a mouse model of retinitis pigmentosa and showed that each electrode could reliably produce a dot of light in the retina.

“We wanted to make sure that two electrodes don’t stimulate the same part of the retina. So we carried out electrophysiological tests that involved recording the activity of retinal ganglion cells [a type of neuron at the inner surface of the retina]. And the results confirmed that each electrode does indeed activate a different part of the retina,” explains Ghezzi.

Currently, the team is awaiting approval to test their prosthesis in humans. Meanwhile, to continue testing the implant, they have developed a virtual reality programme that recreates what the patient would see using their prosthetic. The simulations confirmed the ability of the current setup to generate perceptible images and the implant’s readiness for clinical trials.

<https://coolblindtech.com/researchers-are-developing-a-new-type-of-retinal-implant/>

# Launch of Australia and New Zealand Assistive Technology Survey

Intopia is a socially aware boutique digital agency that promoted inclusive design and development. Intopia has launched the first ever Assistive Technology Survey, aimed at highlighting the trends and use of assistive technology by Australians and New Zealanders that have a disability.

Over the past decade, surveys such as the WebAIM Screen Reader Survey have provided important insights to organisations on how they need to make their online products and services more inclusive and accessible to everyone. Typically, less than 5% of people who take part are from Australia or New Zealand. This survey will identify how Australians and New Zealanders use technology and assistive technology. It will provide important insights to government and corporate sectors, and considerations to put the needs of users first.

The survey can be completed by any person over the age of 18 in Australia or New Zealand that has a disability and uses any form of assistive technology to help them navigate the digital world, or any accessibility setting on their computer or mobile devices. Nearly every question in the survey is optional, which means that you only share the information that you’re comfortable with sharing. The survey is also anonymous, and will take about 10-15 minutes to complete.

The survey will be open until the 5th of May. High-level results from the survey will be released on Global Accessibility Awareness Day, which this year will be held on Thursday May 20. Full results will be released in June 2021. All results will be made publicly available through the Intopia website for free.

You can participate in the Assistive Technology survey through the Intopia website (<https://intopia.digital/assistive-technology-survey-2021-welcome/>). If you have any questions about the survey, you can contact us [ATsurvey@intopia.digital](mailto:ATsurvey@intopia.digital).

Intopia acknowledges the support of Blind Citizens Australia, Blind Citizens New Zealand, VisAbility, Royal Society for the Blind and Next Sense in the development of the Assistive Technology Survey.

# In the kitchen

**Thai Green Curry**

**Ingredients**

1 jar Thai Green Curry Paste (Ayam)  
1 can 400ml Coconut Cream  
1 Onion - diced  
1 bag green beans - cut approx 5cm  
4 Chicken breast fillets - sliced  
(or chicken thigh fillets)  
2 large potatoes or pumpkin piece - diced  
Kaffir lime leaves - crushed ( optional)  
Lime juice and coriander leaves (optional)  
2 Cups rice - cooked

**Method**

In large saucepan, sauté diced onion with tablespoon of coconut cream  
Add Thai Curry Paste and stir for a few minutes until fragrant.  
Add sliced chicken, Kaffir lime leaves, stir for a few minutes.  
Add diced pumpkin or potatoes with cup water. Cook until pumpkin or potatoes are cooked.  
Add rest of coconut cream and green beans. Stir until beans are cooked.  
Serve with rice. Optional - Squeeze lime juice and coriander leaves on top.

# Working With Vulnerable People Card (WWVP) registrations

Due to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, the ACT Government implemented temporary measures to automatically extend WWVP registrations expiring on, or after 16 March 2020.

If your registration expiry date is on, or before 20 August 2021, your registration expiry date is now 12 months after the day your registration would have expired.

A renewal notice will be sent to you close to your temporary expiration date. The notice will contain information which will assist you to complete your renewal application.

Please note that you will not be issued with a new registration card until you renew your registration following this extension. In the meantime, you can use the letter sent to you by the ACT Government as confirmation of continuing registration.

You must submit your renewal application *before* to your new expiry date to continue to be registered while your renewal application is decided.

More information can be found on the ACT Government website: <https://www.accesscanberra.act.gov.au/app/answers/detail/a_id/1804/kw/WWVP>

# National Portrait Gallery - audio described programs

There is an upcoming [Audio Described tour onsite](https://www.portrait.gov.au/calendar/love-stories-audio-described-tour/2210) with a staff member guiding people through the Australian Love Stories exhibition on Sunday 16 May. This might be of interest to some CBS members.

<https://www.portrait.gov.au/calendar/love-stories-audio-described-tour/2210>

The National Portrait Gallery is currently working on writing audio descriptions for our upcoming exhibition [Australian Love Stories](https://www.portrait.gov.au/exhibitions/australian-love-stories-2020) and these recordings will be available on their website and onsite for users sometime in April.

# Braille Group – Sharon Sobey

The Braille Group meets at the Griffin Centre on Thursdays from 10:00 in the CBS office. Enquiries from new or existing members can contact Sharon Sobey on 0419 263 413.

# Book Group

The Book Group has a fascinating story for our meeting on Wednesday 5th May, “The Zookeepers  War” by Australian author Steven Conte. What was it like working and living in the Berlin Zoo during wartime for humans and animals? Enjoy discussing this story, getting to know people, catching up about happenings in the Canberra blind community, places at the table are available. Our June book, “We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves” by Karen Joy Fowler is a family story with a difference.

# Arts and Crafts Group

The Arts and Crafts group meets every second and fourth Wednesday of each month. The next meeting will be on 12 May commencing at 10am. If you would like to join the group and have not already notified us please contact the office to add your name to the circulation list.

# Thanks to our Sponsors

Canberra Blind Society would like to thank our sponsors for supporting our local community

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| **Southern Cross Club Community Rewards Program**  Members of the Southern Cross Club can help us raise funds by taking part in the Southern Cross Club’s Community Rewards program |

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