

COUNCIL OF PRESIDENTS OF MEDICAL COLLEGES

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1st December 2016

Mr Trent Zimmerman
Via Committee Secretariat
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Health, Aged Care and Sport
PO Box 6021
CANBERRA
ACT 2600

Dear Mr Zimmerman

Submission to the Inquiry into the Hearing Health and Wellbeing of Australia

The Council of Presidents of Medical Colleges is the peak body representing the interests of specialist medicine in Australia. Representing all of Australia's doctors, the Council is concerned with ensuring that individual medical specialties have a broad base of intercollegiate knowledge so as to enable them to provide the highest quality of medical care for the Australian community delivered in accordance with accepted clinical principles, and to improve, protect and promote the health of the Australian public.

The Council notes that following a referral on 2 November 2016 from the Minister for Health, Aged Care and Sport, The Hon Sussan Ley MP, the Standing Committee will inquire into and report on the Hearing Health and Wellbeing of Australia. Submissions close 23rd December, 2016.

The Council has noted the Inquiry Terms of Reference as published on the Committee page, in addition to the report published in 2010 by the Australian Senate's Community Affairs References Committee titled, *Hear Us: Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia*. The Senate reported that one in six Australians suffer from some degree of hearing loss and by 2050 that would rise to one in four.

The Australian Government has nine National Health Priority Areas for diseases and conditions which governments have chosen for focussed attention because they contribute significantly to the burden of illness and injury in the Australian community. It remains of concern to the Council that while hearing health is a mainstream health issue it is still not ranked as a national health priority.

The Council is concerned that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (ATSI) suffer ear disease and hearing loss at ten times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians. Ear health for ATSI peoples is currently not included by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) as a priority area in the 'Closing the Gap' targets. The rate of otitis media among Indigenous peoples is much higher than non-Indigenous children. While this is a common middle ear infection affecting one in ten Australian children each year, otitis media with effusion is a chronic condition that if left untreated can cause long-term hearing loss.

The Council concurs with the World Health Organisation which described otitis media among Indigenous Australians as 'a massive public health problem...which needs urgent attention'.¹

¹ World Health Organisation "Prevention of hearing impairment from chronic otitis media" WHO/CIBA Foundation Workshop (1996) http://www.who.int/pbd/deafness/en/chronic_otitis_media.pdf

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The Council is concerned that otitis media affects children's ability to participate in the education system because not being able to hear properly impacts on their learning with delayed language development. This in turn leads to higher absenteeism rates and lower employment opportunities later in life, negatively impacting upon the broader Australian economy. Of concern is that hearing impairment is directly linked to the judicial system, with evidence that up to sixty per cent of children in youth detention centres are Aboriginal, of which approximately eighty per cent have ongoing significant hearing issues when tested.²

The Council concurs with the Queensland Health's Deadly ears Program³ which states that middle ear disease is preventable, treatable and is not a normal part of a child's life. Therefore, the Council urges the Standing Committee to consider hearing health and wellbeing as the next National Health Priority for Australia. CPMC also urges the next meeting of COAG to decide on the level of funding to be made available to establish a national framework for ear health based on best practice principles for the prevention and treatment of otitis media in Australia.

Yours Sincerely,

Laureate Professor Nicholas Talley

Council Chair

² Aboriginal Law Bulletin 3(65) (1993): 58.

³ https://www.health.qld.gov.au/deadly_ears/html/ear-health.asp