



19 June 2017

Committee Secretariat
Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Via Health.Reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

Question raised at public hearing 16 June 2017, Canberra

IMPACT OF CHANGES TO VETERANS COMPENSATION ARRANGEMENTS

At last week's hearing of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Hearing Health and Wellbeing of Australia, your committee had asked a representative of Office of Hearing Services about changes to arrangements for Returned Servicemen with hearing loss.

This is an issue that Deafness Forum had raised in July 2015 with the then Minister for Health Ms Sussan Ley and with the Minister for Veterans' Affairs Senator Michael Ronaldson.

Current and former members of the Australian Defence Force who sustained a physical or psychological impairment or incapacity due to their defence service may be eligible for compensation. The type of payment and the amount payable depends on the period of service when the injury occurred. The claimant may be covered under the *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004*, the *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988* or the *Veterans Entitlement Act 1986*.

As a result of a recent Review of Military Compensation Arrangements, Veterans with long term treatment needs under the *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988* (SRC Act) were issued with a Repatriation Health Card for specific conditions (White Specific Treatment card). This was intended to streamline services and payments, however it also introduced changes to the level of hearing aid technology that a Veteran could receive for free.

Prior to the issuing of the White Specific Treatment Card, those Veterans requiring hearing assistance who were covered by the SRC Act could receive "all reasonable costs of aids and appliances reasonably required as a result of the person's injury". This meant that the person could receive a hearing aid with high level features at no cost. Now that these Veterans have been issued with a White Specific Treatment Card they receive their hearing

services under the Australian Government Hearing Services Program. Under this Program, access to high level technology requires the person to make a co-payment (“top-up”). So the Veteran has gone from receiving a high level hearing aid at no cost, to one where they are required to pay an additional fee.

The report from the Review of Military Compensation Arrangements noted that access to hearing aids had tighter guidelines if the person was using a White Specific Treatment Card. The report indicated that the Department of Veterans’ Affairs believed that any negative outcomes from the change to a White Specific Treatment Card could be minimised. However no special arrangements have been put in place in relation to access to high level hearing aids for Veterans claiming compensation under the SRC Act. In fact the Department of Veterans’ Affairs has made it very clear in various publications that it will not fund “top up” devices under the Australian Government Hearing Services Program and has indicated that this is a matter of negotiation between the individual and their Provider.

It is unreasonable that Veterans who sustained a hearing loss as a result of their military service should be disadvantaged in being able to access high level technology due to a change in administrative arrangements in the management of military compensation, whereas other claimants under the same Act eg Public Servants, continue to receive high level devices at no cost. Veterans were not consulted or informed of the changes in the level of hearing devices they would receive when they were issued with the White Specific Treatment Card.

Deafness Forum Australia believes that the anomaly in relation to access to high level hearing aids that has arisen as a result of the changes to the treatment arrangements for Veterans covered by the *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988* needs to be addressed. Recommendations for high level technology for Veterans covered by the *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988* should be referred to the Audiologists at the Office of Hearing Services for approval. These requests need to be considered on the basis of clinical appropriateness and also in relation to parity with those devices funded for other claimants under the SRC Act.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Williamson
Chief Executive