



Supplementary submission to the inquiry into the Hearing Health and Wellbeing of Australia

Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport

Deafness Forum of Australia

Deafness Forum is the peak, national not for profit organisation that represents the one in six Australians who have a hearing impairment, a chronic disorder of the ear, are Deaf or deafblind, and the families who support them.

Deafness Forum's objective is to provide timely and realistic advice to government on strategic policy development and practice reform.

Deafness Forum thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide this supplementary submission.

In this submission, Deafness Forum of Australia provides new additional information relating to Terms of Reference serial 9:

Whether hearing health and wellbeing should be considered as the next National Health Priority for Australia

9. Whether hearing health and wellbeing should be considered as the next National Health Priority for Australia

Deafness Forum of Australia and its members are deeply concerned about the rising prevalence of disabling hearing loss in Australia and globally.

We believe that more must be done by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and its member states to raise the priority of hearing health care and address the increasing rates of hearing disability and its economic and social consequences.

We ask the Australian Government to support a draft resolution aimed at addressing hearing loss when it is presented to a meeting of the World Health Assembly (WHA) in Geneva in May 2017. This draft resolution sets out a framework for a comprehensive public health response each country can implement, relative to local needs and hearing health infrastructure. The resolution is included as an appendix to this supplementary submission.

Key facts

Irrespective of a person's age, disabling hearing loss has a profound impact on interpersonal communication, health and social well-being, quality of life and economic independence.

According to WHO estimates,

- The number of people with a hearing impairment increased from 42 million in 1985 to about 360 million in 2011
- Over 5% of the world's population, 360 million people worldwide have disabling hearing loss; around 32 million are children
- Half of all cases of hearing loss are avoidable through primary prevention
- Around 60% of childhood hearing loss is preventable
- One billion young people (12-35 years) are at risk of hearing loss due to recreational exposure to loud sounds
- Approximately one-third of people over 65 years of age are affected by disabling hearing loss
- Hearing loss may result from genetic causes, complications at birth, certain infectious diseases, chronic ear infections, the use of particular drugs, exposure to excessive noise and ageing
- Many people with hearing loss can benefit from technology such as hearing devices and other assistive devices

It is hoped that the Australian Government will support this resolution in line with most other members of the WHO.

The Government can lead in its response by making hearing health and wellbeing a national priority in Australia and commencing work on an action plan in line with the WHO resolution.

This is a public health issue of such scale in Australia, it is critical to raise the priority of hearing health care.

Hearing loss represents a significant and quantifiable economic cost and impact to Australia, one which far outweighs current expenditure. The annual financial cost to the economy has been estimated at \$11billion in lost productivity.

It is clear that without hearing health and wellbeing becoming a National Health Priority the deep seated need for improvements in this area will continue to be inadequately addressed to the great detriment of the Australian people. Addressing many of the issues raised in the various submissions made to this current inquiry into the Hearing Health and Wellbeing of Australia needs strong, sustained national promotion until attitudes and actions change.

Hearing loss results in a range of health problems when it is not treated - co-morbidities and illnesses that are referenced in most of Australia's nine national health priorities are common in people with untreated hearing loss. It follows that hearing health should become a National Health Priority Area. This will save costs to individuals and society and affirm Australia's global standing as a leader in the field of health care.

RECOMMENDATION 9.1

That the Australian Government supports a resolution aimed at preventing hearing loss when it is presented to a meeting of the World Health Assembly in Geneva in May 2017.

RECOMMENDATION 9.2

That the Australian Government makes hearing health and wellbeing a National Health Priority to address the high social and financial costs it imposes on Australian society.

RECOMMENDATION 9.3

That a national action plan be formulated to give appropriate and focused attention on improving Australia's hearing health and wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATION 9.4

That a relevant consumer-oriented organisation, such as Deafness Forum of Australia be funded by Government to participate in the implementation of the strategy.

Appendix 1

139th session

EB139.R1

Agenda item 6.3

30 May 2016

Development of a new Health Assembly resolution and action plan for prevention of deafness and hearing loss

The Executive Board,

Having considered the report on development of a new Health Assembly resolution and action plan for prevention of deafness and hearing loss,¹

RECOMMENDS to the Seventieth World Health Assembly the adoption of the following resolution:

The Seventieth World Health Assembly,

Recognizing that 360 million people across the world live with disabling hearing loss, a total that includes 32 million children and nearly 180 million older adults;

Acknowledging that nearly 90% of the people with hearing loss live in low- and middle-income countries, which often lack resources and strategies to address hearing loss;

Concerned by the persistent high prevalence of chronic ear diseases, such as chronic suppurative otitis media, which lead to hearing loss and may cause life-threatening complications;

Acknowledging the significance of work-related, noise-induced hearing loss, in addition to issues related to recreational and environmental noise-induced hearing loss;

Aware that unaddressed hearing loss is linked with cognitive decline and contributes to the burden of depression and dementia, especially in older adults;

Noting the significant impact of ear diseases and hearing loss on the development, ability to communicate, education, livelihood, social well-being and economic independence of individuals, as well as on communities and countries;

Aware that most of the causes of hearing loss are avoidable with preventive strategies; that the interventions available are both successful and cost-effective; but that, despite this, most people with ear diseases and hearing loss do not have access to suitable services;

¹ Document EB139/5.

Recalling resolutions WHA48.9 (1995) on prevention of hearing impairment, and WHA58.23 (2005) on disability, including prevention, management and rehabilitation;

Recalling also the *World report on disability 2011*,¹ which recommends investment in improved access to health services, rehabilitation and assistive technologies and the WHO global disability action plan 2014–2021,² based on the report's recommendations;

Mindful of the Sustainable Development Goals in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, specifically Goal 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages) with its target 3.8 on achieving universal health coverage, which implicitly recognizes the need for persons with disabilities to have access to quality health care services, and recognizing that the targets of Goal 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) explicitly mention persons with disabilities, and that unaddressed hearing loss greatly hinders their education and academic outcomes;

Appreciating the efforts made by Member States and international partners in recent years to prevent hearing loss, but mindful of the need for further action,

1. URGES Member States, taking into account their national circumstances:

- (1) to integrate strategies for ear and hearing care within the framework of their primary health care systems, under the umbrella of universal health coverage, by such means as raising awareness at all levels and building political commitment and intersectoral collaboration;
- (2) to collect high-quality population-based data on ear diseases and hearing loss in order to develop evidence-based strategies and policies;
- (3) to establish suitable training programmes for development of human resources in the field of ear and hearing care;
- (4) to ensure the highest possible coverage of vaccination against rubella, measles, mumps and meningitis, in line with the immunization targets of the global vaccine action plan 2011–2020, and in accordance with national priorities;
- (5) to develop, implement and monitor screening programmes for early identification of ear diseases such as chronic suppurative otitis media and hearing loss in high-risk populations, including infants, young children, older adults and people exposed to noise in occupational and recreational settings;
- (6) to improve access to affordable, cost-effective, high-quality, assistive hearing technologies and products, including hearing aids, cochlear implants and other assistive devices, as part of universal health coverage, taking into account the delivery capacity of health care systems in an equitable and sustainable manner;

¹ World report on disability 2011. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2011. Available at http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/en/ (accessed 11 April 2016).

² Available at http://www.who.int/disabilities/about/action_plan/en/ (accessed 11 April 2016).

(7) to develop and implement regulations for control of noise in occupational settings, at entertainment venues and through personal audio systems, as well as for control of ototoxic medicines;

(8) to improve access to means of communication through promoting alternative methods of communication, such as sign language and captioning;

(9) to work towards the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages) and Goal 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with special reference to people with hearing loss;

2. REQUESTS the Director-General:

(1) to prepare a world report on ear and hearing care, based on the best-available scientific evidence;

(2) to develop a toolkit as well as provide the necessary technical support for Member States in collecting data, planning national strategies for ear and hearing care, specifying how prevention of hearing loss can be integrated in other health care programmes, raising awareness, screening for hearing loss and ear diseases, training and provision of assistive technologies;

(3) to intensify collaboration with all stakeholders with the aim to reduce hearing loss due to recreational exposure to noise through the development and promotion of safe-listening standards, screening protocols, software applications to promote safe-listening and information products;

(4) to undertake advocacy through World Hearing Day on 3 March each year, with a different theme every year;

(5) to report on progress in implementation of this resolution to the World Health Assembly.¹

Second meeting, 30 May 2016
EB139/SR/2

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¹ The Executive Board agreed that the long-term reporting requirements of this resolution should be included in the forward-looking planning schedule of expected agenda items, established by decision WHA69(8). See summary record of the Executive Board at its 139th session, second meeting.