

Committee Secretariat:

Inquiry into the Hearing Health and Wellbeing of Australia

PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA
Canberra ACT 2600

14 November 2016

Terms of reference:

1. The current causes and costs of hearing loss, and ear or balance disorder to the Australian health care system should existing arrangements remain in place;
2. Community awareness, information, education and promotion about hearing loss and health care;
3. Access to, and cost of services, which include hearing assessments, treatment and support, Auslan language services, and new hearing aid technology;
8. Developments in research into hearing loss, including: prevention, causes, treatment regimes, and potential new technologies;
9. Whether hearing health and wellbeing should be considered as the next National Health Priority for Australia; and
10. Any other relevant matter.

Dear Committee Secretariat,

Regarding: Inquiry into the Hearing Health and Wellbeing of Australia

I am writing to because of my own personal interest into the health and mental wellbeing of people who have a hearing impairment. I will refer to the above terms of reference that I have selected as I feel that they are the most relevant to my situation.

My son was diagnosed as having mild to moderate permanent senso-neural hearing loss from the age of 3 years. It was fitted with bi-lateral hearing aids and wore these until he reached Year 8 in Secondary College. As a young teenager in Secondary school, he began to feel conscious of wearing the hearing aids in term of his appearance. He wanted to feel what he perceived as being 'normal' and he subsequently refused to continue to wear the hearing aids.

I observed that without the hearing aids, he could not hear conversations properly. There was nothing I could say or do to persuade him to wear them as it caused arguments and friction between us.

I noticed that he began to withdraw socially. He would not engage in social conversation with friends or family. He slowly over time became socially awkward and I could see him becoming more and more disconnected with people. It was evident that he was suffering from some sort of depression. I tried again to get him to wear his hearing aids. I tried to explain to him what I could see and how I felt that not wearing the hearing aids was impacting his social life and mental health. He just would not listen. He was being a defiant teenager. However, he was losing friends and his social life.

When we made the sea change and bought a new house, my son had to go to a new school. By this stage he was in Year 11, beginning his V.C.E. After a few weeks at the new school, he came home crying and distressed. He realised he could not hear or participate in conversations with peers, class discussions or hear teacher instructions. He decided he wanted to wear the hearing aids again. He in fact did begin to wear them but by this stage, he had lost all social skills. He found it extremely difficult to engage in social banter with peers. He would come home crying, feeling like people were teasing him and not understanding social jokes. He began again to isolate himself as he found it difficult to connect with people. His social circle was limited. In fact he only had one friend that he occasionally went out to a Melbourne club with.

He managed to pass VCE and gain a position at University to undertake a degree in the Arts. He completed 2 years only. By the time my son was 20, it was obvious he was suffering from depression. I tried to take him to local youth centres, youth counsellors and even Headspace. Everything failed. At the age of 20, my son had what is known as a 'first episode psychosis' attack. He totally lost his mind for lack of a better term. He spent two weeks in a psychiatric facility at Monash hospital.

Psychosis is where a person sees or hears hallucinations. He became catatonic as he had withdrawn so far into himself that he lost all sense of reality. He internalised conversations rather than have them with real people.

My son is now under ongoing psychiatric care. He needs medication every day. He is currently on a limited disability allowance. He cannot drive. He has had to put on hold his university degree. He is now working with social workers to help build up his social skills and to create goals in life.

My son now realises the importance of wearing hearing aids. It is vital that the current hearing services provided by Australian hearing continue (terms of reference 1). Without these services, hearing impaired people could not afford to pay for private hearing aids. They cost anywhere from \$2500 for a basic pair to up to \$9000 for a quality pair. It is my understanding that services are funded federally until a person turns 26 years of age. These services are so important that this must be continued permanently.

In regards to reference 2: community awareness and education is essential. We must create campaigns about eradicating the stigma associated with wearing hearing aids, being deaf or hearing impaired. Public campaigns and changing social attitudes may help people avoid what we have gone through. If my son did not have such a stigma about wearing his hearing aids, we may have avoided his mental health issues or at least reduced them.

Reference 3/ 8: Investment into new hearing aid technology is critical. This should be encouraged and funded by our government so people can have the gift of hearing and hearing at a level that is considered 20/20. No one should be left out and feel socially out of it because they cannot hear conversations.

Reference 9: the next big campaign without a doubt must be the mental health of people, especially young people who have hearing loss. Our young people are facing more and more cases of depression, suicides, drugs and alcohol issues and it needs to stop. We must help our young people so they do not have to face what we have gone through. Not one counsellor has understood the level of depression caused by hearing loss until we saw a private psychiatrist this year.

My son is only 21 now and the impact of this hearing loss to his mental health has been significant. His social life is non-existent. His ability to work has been assessed by Centrelink as limited, being less than 8 hours a week.

I would be further willing to discuss my case and situation with the committee to provide more information. I sincerely hope that funding continues and the mental health of hearing impaired people is given absolute priority. It could potentially save a person from being admitted into a psychiatric ward, having to take ongoing anti-psychosis and anti-depressant medication. You could help give hearing impaired people a normal life.

Regards