

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 On 25 June 2014, the Senate established the Senate Select Committee on Health.¹ The final reporting date for the committee is 20 June 2016. The committee's resolution allows the committee to make interim reports such as this one.

Public hearings

1.2 The committee has completed 37 public hearings to date (a link to a full list of hearings is at Appendix 1).

1.3 Through its extensive program of public hearings, the committee has taken evidence from many health experts, practitioners, consumers and communities. The public hearing program has also enabled the committee to engage the wider Australian community, including those in rural and regional areas who may not normally be able to directly engage with a Senate Committee.

1.4 On 10 July the committee held a public hearing in Sydney at the Australian Hearing Hub to take evidence regarding the government's proposed privatisation of Australian Hearing Services and the National Acoustics Laboratories.

1.5 As part of its public hearing at the Australian Hearing Hub, the committee conducted a short site visit to better understand the work of Australian Hearing and the National Acoustics Laboratories.

Submissions

1.6 The committee has received 165 submissions since the beginning of its inquiry (a full list of submissions is at Appendix 2).² In relation to the proposed privatisation of Australian Hearing, the committee has received eight submissions.

1.7 The committee's terms of reference are wide-ranging and it is the committee's intention to explore various issues in depth over the course of its inquiry. While the committee is still accepting general submissions, the committee intends to seek submissions on specific topics as the need arises over the course of the inquiry.

1.8 Additional information, tabled documents, correspondence and answers to questions on notice received by the committee to date are listed at Appendix 3.

Health Committee's first interim report

1.9 The committee's first interim report was tabled on 2 December 2014.³ That report detailed the committee's findings and conclusions at that time, focussing on

1 *Journals of the Senate*, 25 June 2014, pp 996–998.

2 The submissions received by the committee can be accessed via the committee's website: www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Health/Health/Submissions.

3 *Journals of the Senate*, 2 December 2014, p. 1948.

issues raised during the committee's hearings and through submissions. Key areas of focus for the committee in its first report were:

- the government's proposed patient co-payments, cuts to hospital funding and the abolition of Australian National Preventative Health Agency;
- the government's plan to close the 61 Medicare Locals and replace them with 30 Primary Health Networks; and
- the merger of the Organ and Tissue Authority and the National Blood Authority.

Second interim report

1.10 The committee's second interim report was tabled on 24 June 2015.⁴ That report encompassed the committee's findings regarding the government's primary healthcare and general practice policies. In particular the report was a record of the government's frequent changes of policy since the 2014 Budget. The second interim report focused specifically on:

- the vital importance of general practice and primary healthcare and the threat posed by the government's numerous policy changes since the 2014 Budget;
- the responses of GPs and the primary healthcare sector to the government's various primary care policies; and
- an examination of the 2015-16 Budget's health measures and commentary from stakeholders.

Structure of this report

1.11 This report examines the government's proposed privatisation of Australian Hearing Services and the National Acoustics Laboratories. The proposal was originally recommended by the National Commission of Audit in February 2014.⁵ In the 2014-15 Budget the government allocated funding for a scoping study for the proposed privatisation of Australian Hearing.⁶ The 2015-16 Budget included the postponement of a decision on the scoping study, pending further consultation.⁷

1.12 This third interim report will outline the evidence taken at the hearing on 10 July and the submissions made by witnesses. Following this introductory chapter, the report is divided into two chapters:

- the impacts privatisation would have on users of the Australian Hearing services (Chapter 2); and
- the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and Australian Hearing (Chapter 3).

4 *Journals of the Senate*, 24 June 2015, p. 2809.

5 National Commission of Audit, *Phase One Report*, paragraph 10.1 and recommendation 57.

6 2014-15 Budget, Budget Paper No. 2, Budget Measure: Smaller Government — scoping studies for four operations of government, p. 117.

7 Senator the Hon Mathias Cormann, Minister for Finance, media release, 'Further Consultation on Future Ownership Options for Australian Hearing', 8 May 2015.

Notes on references

1.13 References to submissions in this report are to individual submissions received by the committee and published on the committee's website. References to the committee Hansards are to the official transcripts.⁸

Acknowledgements

1.14 The committee thanks the various organisations and individuals that made written submissions, and those who gave evidence at the public hearing on 10 July into the proposed privatisation of Australian Hearing. The committee thanks the Australian Hearing Hub for hosting the hearing.

1.15 The committee particularly wishes to thank those who shared their personal experiences during the hearing on 10 July 2015 and through submissions to the committee's inquiry. Appendix 4 of this report is one example of the personal experiences of Australians with hearing impairment who have benefited from the services of Australian Hearing. More examples, taken from the Hansard transcript made on 10 July 2015, are included in the committee's report.

8 Committee Hansards can be accessed via the committee's website:
www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Health/Health/Public_Hearings.

