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Submission of the Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee

The Senate made the announcement on Thursday 10th September 2009 that an inquiry would be conducted by the Community Affairs References Committee into hearing health in Australia. The purpose of this inquiry would be to examine the adequacy of access to hearing services, the adequacy of current hearing health and research programs and specific issues affecting Indigenous communities.

(a) The extent, causes and costs of hearing impairment in Australia

One in six people in Australia have a hearing loss. This equates to over four million people in Australia who have been identified as being deaf or having a hearing impairment. Over 30% is caused by the exposure of excessive noise which is most significant single cause of hearing loss in Australia (*Access Economics: Listen Hear! The economic impact and cost of hearing loss in Australia, February 2006*).

Hearing loss can be described as congenital or acquired. A congenital hearing loss is one that is present at or soon after birth whereas an acquired loss is one that occurs later on.

Also, depending on which part of the hearing system is affected, a hearing loss is categorised as conductive or sensorineural. A conductive hearing loss leads to a loss of loudness, and can often be helped by medical or surgical treatment. A sensorineural hearing loss is a result of damage to, or malfunction of, the cochlea (the sensory part) or the hearing nerve (the neural part). Again it can be acquired or congenital.

Hearing loss costs Australia almost \$12 billion a year, with almost 160,000 people not able to work because of their hearing loss (*Access Economics: Listen Hear! The economic impact and cost of hearing loss in Australia, February 2006*). In addition, compensation claims for noise induced hearing loss due to excessive noise at work comprises a very significant proportion of all claims for occupational health issues.

Hearing loss is the second most prevalent national health issue, yet it remains the 8th national funding priority. The scope of the review does not include costs associated specifically with otitis media-related hearing loss, but noted that these are substantial within the Indigenous population (*Access Economics: Listen Hear! The economic impact and cost of hearing loss in Australia, February 2006*).

(b) The implications of hearing impairment for individuals and the community

The diagnosis of childhood hearing impairment can affect the whole family. Parents may experience grief, shock, anger or confusion when they are confronted with a host of unfamiliar issues and decisions about hearing aids and education. In fact, most families experience all of these emotions in varying degrees at different times throughout their child's life. Therefore it must be recognised that even though the person affected with hearing loss is coping sufficiently, it must be recognised that the surrounding support structure, such as the family and friends, may find the situation extremely difficult.

The impact of hearing loss on a developing child is quite different from the effects of hearing loss that occurs in adulthood. Children use their hearing to *learn* about the world around them and develop communication skills. This in turn affects their relationships with family and friends, their education and their later employment.

Children with a moderate or greater degree of hearing loss in both ears would benefit from amplification to ensure they have optimal hearing for speech and language development. Current research suggests that children who are born with a moderate or greater sensorineural hearing loss in both ears are most likely to achieve the best outcomes if the hearing loss is diagnosed and intervention commences before they are six months of age.

Young people have varying vulnerability to noise-induced hearing loss; people of any age can suffer from noise damage. Researchers at the University of Florida have found that approximately 17 % of students aged 10 to 20 years old tested already have lost some ability to hear. The problem will keep getting worse if they don't protect themselves from the piercing decibels of loud music (i.e. iPods), motorcycles and other assaults on their ears.

President Clinton recently had hearing aids fitted after having trouble over a long period of time with high frequency sounds. One of his doctors pointed out that such a loss was common and usually caused by ageing and early exposure to loud noises. He replied, "High-frequency hearing loss is mostly due to noise exposure usually as a teenager listening to rock-'n-roll or playing in bands", such as he had experienced.

Hearing loss among the elderly is also particularly common and can be misinterpreted as a problem of cognitive function rather than difficulty with hearing. Unidentified hearing loss can lead to a gradual withdrawal from previous activities, poor relationships with family and a feeling of inadequacy and/or shame. Depression is a serious and common complaint amongst hard of hearing people. Hearing loss has been identified as a factor in accelerated onset and symptoms of dementia.

War veterans are also likely to suffer from hearing problems due to hearing damage from noise exposure during their war service. Hearing is the second most common medical condition reported by Australian war veterans and war widows, with 55% reporting hearing loss as a current medical condition (*Australian Government, Department of Veterans' Affairs, Your lives, Your needs 2003, Findings from the 2003 Survey of Entitled Veterans, War Widows and their Carers commissioned by the Department of Veterans' Affairs*).

Over half of Australia's farmers are also likely to suffer from premature hearing loss through occupational Noise exposure from agricultural machinery, tools and pigs in sheds at feeding time. Almost all farmers over the age of 55 who have been exposed to loud noise suffer some degree of hearing loss. However, only 18 percent of farmers wear hearing protection while working with heavy machinery (*Williams W, Forby-Atkinson L and Gartshore G: 'Hearing Loss and the Farming Community', J Occup Health Safety – Aust NZ 2002 18 (2), 35 – 44.*)

Despite being the most widespread disability in the community, hearing loss is also the most misunderstood by the many Australians who have a hearing loss. Far too many hearing impaired Australians simply do not know or take the trouble to discover the support services that are available to help them. Rehabilitation services and assistive listening devices can greatly improve quality of life and assist in managing hearing loss. Families, friends and colleagues are also often unaware of the implications and damaging effect of hearing loss.

(c) The adequacy of access to hearing services, including assessment and support services, and hearing technologies

Better Hearing Australia is the national voice of all people in Australia with hearing impairment, promoting good communication and life solutions by the provision of education, support and advocacy and outlines the strategic guidelines below

- To equip the person with hearing impairment with necessary information and skills to permit successful management of their social, education and occupational environment.
- To raise community awareness concerning issues of importance for people with hearing impairment.
- To provide opportunities through advisory and support services for people with hearing impairment to deal with the effects of hearing loss and restore confidence and self-esteem.
- To submit briefs and make representations to any private or governmental organization to ensure the specific needs of people with hearing impairment are met.
- To identify any discrimination with regard to hearing impairment and seek to enforce compliance with the requirements of any anti-discrimination legislation.
- To provide advice on obtaining a hearing test, qualifications and locations of service providers, and explanations of the hearing process and hearing test results (audiogram).

Better Hearing Australia often acts as an advocate in straightening out difficulties encountered by hearing impaired people. It continually lobbies government, councils and the community for audio loop installations in public venues and increased and improved TV captioning. Better Hearing Australia helps organize the annual Hearing Awareness Week.

Better Hearing Australia also provides advice and can demonstrate assistive technology for telephone use, personal listening, television and music reception, safety and alerting signals, with or without the use of hearing aids and other devices.

Hearing technologies have made leaps and bounds over the years, especially with cochlear implants. Cochlear implant in the long term has restored detection of everyday sounds in the environment and improved face to face communication and finally the ability to understand speech through hearing alone. Parents who made a substantial financial and personal investment would surely be happy to know that it can be worthwhile and that it could result in "improved job opportunities and quality of life for their child." (Cowan, R. S. C. (1997). Socioeconomic and educational management issues. *Cochlear implantation for infants and children: Advances* (pp. 223-240). San Diego, CA: Singular Publishing Group)

The needs of the hearing impaired are many and diverse: special education services, provisions for access such as interpreters and note takers, and technology such as assistive devices and TTYs all enable the hearing impaired community to lead comparatively 'normal' lives and to contribute to society. A hearing aid or cochlear implant does not necessarily remove the need for such services and technology. I would like to see the Commonwealth Government to provide free access and free upgrades for cochlear speech processors. This will ensure that Cochlear Implantees continue to enjoy something we take for granted-the ability to hear.

Estabrooks states that “Children who are deaf or hearing impaired can grow up in regular learning and living environments enabling them to become independent, participating and contributing citizens in mainstream society” (*Auditory-verbal practice. In S. B. Waltzman, & N. L. Cohen (Eds.), Cochlear implants (pp. 225). New York: Thieme.*). This is accomplished by helping the child develop his/her listening skills which enable the learning of speech and language in a natural way following normal developmental patterns.

People who are hearing impaired are found in a wide array of professions, such as law, medicine, drama, research, teaching, information technology and accounting. People who are hearing impaired are found in all sorts of interesting activities, including travel, writing, sports, religious activities, social clubs, and more. While professionals also have a responsibility to not overload parents with too much technical detail, they need to ensure that they have ample information. (Clark, M. 1989. *Language through living for hearing impaired children*. London: Hodder and Stroughton.)

Professionals in the Hearing field also need to reassure parents and teachers that the child can reflect the previous statements. Still, parents have indicated that they prefer to have too much information rather than not enough and that information needs to be meaningful. (Informed choice, families and deaf children: Professional Handbook. 2004. Nottingham: DfES Publications.)

(d) The adequacy of current hearing health and research programs, including education and awareness programs

Better Hearing Australia complements the services of hearing aid suppliers, speech therapists, audiologists and specialists. The following list of services clearly shows the gaps that Better Hearing Australia can and does fill around Australia.

- **Hearing Advisory Service**
Free independent current hearing advice available including training in all aspects of hearing loss management and hearing health care. This enables more informed decision making about managing hearing loss and other ear problems.
- **Referral Assistance**
Better Hearing Australia often assists by referring a hearing impaired person to an appropriate organization or to government services. Being independent, we are unable to refer to service providers but can provide advice on qualifications and locations of service providers.

- **Information sessions**
Hearing Advisors deliver informative and engaging talks to many community groups such as Probuss, retired citizens and multicultural clubs and cover vital subjects such as early signs of hearing loss, obtaining hearing assessments, hearing aids and assistive technology and communication tips for people with a hearing loss and their communication partners,
- **Assistive listening devices and hearing aids**
Better Hearing Australia provides advice and demonstration of assistive technology such as telephones, personal listening, television and music reception, and safety and alerting signals. This includes information on hearing aids and government assistance programs.
- **Hearing aids for those in need – Community Assistance Scheme**
Advice on how to obtain recycled hearing aids for people with low incomes can also be obtained. The Victorian Branch of Better Hearing Australia has a Hearing Aid Bank and Community Assistance Scheme which enables some people with hearing loss on low incomes to be fitted with a reconditioned hearing aid at little or no cost.
- **Hearing Help Card**
The Better Hearing Australia Hearing Help Card is carried by many Australians who present it in situations that require immediate identification of a hearing and communication problem.
- **Hearing Help in Hospitals**
A Better Hearing Australia Hospital kit readily identifies a patient with a hearing loss and explains communication needs. It also prevents what could prove to be dangerous misunderstanding and is valued by both patients and medical staff.
- **Hearing Loss Sessions for Training Organisations**
Qualified Hearing Advisors can also deliver comprehensive education sessions on hearing loss and management strategies to students in TAFE colleges and other training organisations. The sessions are particularly relevant to Aged Care and Nursing students.
- **Staff and Workplace Hearing Loss Management Training**
Similar training content is also provided in any setting where staff members are required to communicate effectively with people with hearing loss including patients, clients, work colleagues or the general public
- **Tinnitus Information**
Tinnitus is the presence of a sound in one or both ears or “in the head” that is not actually present in the environment. The experience of tinnitus can range from being mildly annoying to highly distressing. Tinnitus often occurs in conjunction with hearing loss and thus information can be provided about this condition.
- **Consumer Protection**
Advice and assistance regarding consumer protection relating to the purchase of hearing aids and other technology is also provided.

- **Hearing Conservation Advice**

Noise induced hearing loss is common in our society. Increasing numbers of teenagers have permanent hearing loss often accompanying tinnitus. Information and advice is provided on all aspects of hearing conservation including safe and unsafe noise levels, potentially hazardous listening situations, suitable types of hearing protection and behavior conducive to hearing health.

The purpose of Hearing Loss Education is to increase awareness for all concerned. As an extension of that awareness, it is hoped to widen the scope and range of the Better Hearing Australia not-for-profit organization and bring its services to the many more people in our community who need them. Better Hearing Australia has qualified hearing advisors, as well as comprehensive competency based training to enable the provisioning of hearing loss management services and programs.

(e) Specific issues affecting Indigenous communities

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people it can be as high as 7 out of every 10 adults. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have 'runny ear' or 'glue ear'. Early assessment and treatment by a health worker, doctor, audiologist or education specialist may help these conditions and prevent later hearing damage.

Better Hearing Australia (Vic) branch has an outreach program and visits local communities to test hearing, including indigenous communities.

“The unmet needs of Indigenous people with disability remains a major concern. The vast majority of Indigenous people with disability remain without a voice. It is critical that the Commonwealth Government continue to support the building of a social movement of Indigenous people with disability and their carers.” added Therese Sands Executive Director, People with Disability Australia (PWD).

“We also need a more effective advocacy program to support Indigenous people with disability. This must involve a concerted outreach strategy so that Indigenous people living with impairment can access the supports they need to participate in their own communities and the wider community.” said Matthew Bowden Executive Director, People with Disability Australia (PWD).

As mentioned above, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people it can be as high as 7 out of every 10 adults are affected by hearing loss. This clearly identifies the need for further research in a range of areas, including Indigenous hearing health. In particular, it called for research regarding the epidemiology of hearing loss and associated risk factors in Indigenous communities, and the nature and extent of intermittent as well as permanent conductive hearing loss and its effects on learning.

Hearing loss may also contribute to poor social and emotional wellbeing, behavioural problems, and poor social skills, and can have long-term, negative social impacts, including: limited employment options; increased risk of anti-social behaviour, drug use, and contact with the criminal justice system.