

Better Hearing Australia (Vic) Inc.

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Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia

Submitted by: Better Hearing Australia (Victoria) Inc.

To:

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Who we are:

Better Hearing Australia (Victoria) Inc., is a not for profit, volunteer based organisation run by a Committee of Management and committed to providing service to the hearing impaired community.

What we do:

The Hearing Advisory Services.

BHA (Vic) provides free, independent and confidential hearing advisory services to anyone needing help. This includes, but is not limited to, information about hearing and hearing loss, tinnitus, communication strategies, hearing aids and other assistive listening technology. Free hearing tests can also be accessed through BHA (Vic). This service is funded by the Victorian Government through the Department of Human Services.

Community Assistance Scheme/Hearing Aid Bank.

BHA (Vic) operates and manages the only hearing aid bank in Victoria. This free community assistance scheme aims to provide assistance to people who require hearing aids, but are not in a position to access the private system, and are ineligible for the Australian Government Scheme through the Office of Hearing Services. Many low income people are helped, including refugees and people who are unemployed. The resources are limited as we rely on donations of behind the ear hearing aids, which are then cleaned, reconditioned and fitted by a volunteer hearing aid practitioner.

Member Services

BHA (Vic) is run by a volunteer Committee of Management, elected from the membership of the organisation. The opportunity to volunteer with the organisation provides diverse opportunities and a chance to interact with other people who have hearing problems. Other member services include social functions and educational opportunities as well as regular newsletters.

Staff who provide the services

Our operation is modest, but we always aim to recruit well qualified and highly experienced professionals to provide the services offered. All Hearing Advisors staff have Audiology, Audiometry, Education and Speech Pathology backgrounds.

The Senate Inquiry

Hearing Advisors at BHA (Vic) are constantly in contact with the community who are in need of a variety of hearing services. We do not provide services to children, but see people from all other demographics. (age, location, socio-economic background etc.)

Our interest in submitting to the Senate Inquiry stems from the information, feedback and anecdotal evidence we get from our service users.

Issues

Issues we believe need to be investigated include:

- Lack of services for low income workers and others who do not qualify for the assistance from the Office of Hearing Services.
- Counselling and follow up services for hearing aid users
- More help for Tinnitus sufferers
- Investigation into “hard sell” techniques from hearing aid companies, including those offering the OHS services.
- Reduction in free services due to the State Government closures of health centres and public hospital Audiology services.

Details**a. the extent, causes and costs of hearing impairment in Australia;**

In February 2006, Access Economics reported on the Economic Impact and Cost of Hearing Loss in Australia. We do not intend to quote extensively from this report as it is freely available and the Senate Committee will no doubt be familiar with it.

Our concerns regarding the extent, causes and costs of hearing impairment in Australia include the possibility of an increase in the numbers of people suffering hearing impairment. The Government has acknowledged that numbers are likely to rise. If the rise in numbers includes younger people who are subjected to high noise levels through the use of personal music systems, the impact on the individuals and the community could be enormous.

Younger people are less likely to be able to afford hearing aids, and also less likely to qualify for government assistance. Their ability to finance hearing devices can be reduced by low incomes, the need to pay off HECS and other debts and commitments to beginning their lives as independent adults and raising children. At BHA(Vic) we regularly see younger people who are finding it hard to stay in the work force because of a hearing loss. They do not qualify for assistance through the Office of Hearing Services but cannot afford to access hearing aids privately. This often includes people who have been fitted with hearing aids through OHS as children.

Public education programs regarding the dangers of loud music would go some way to providing a deterrent and perhaps reducing the numbers of people who would ultimately be affected.

b. the implications of hearing impairment for individuals and the community;

The impact of a hearing loss for individuals and the community is discussed in the report by Access Economics. It is our belief that as individuals, people with hearing loss are often marginalised or isolated because family, friends and colleagues are ignorant of the affects of hearing loss. Even when an individual is fitted with a hearing aid, the benefits and limitations may not be fully understood, both by the user and their significant others. This can lead to a view that the hearing impaired person is not trying, not interested, or not capable.

More advice, information and support is needed for people with hearing loss as well as for their families and friends. This should help to alleviate the varying and serious implications of hearing impairment on individuals. Better public education programs will help in the broader community.

Such services are more appropriately provided independently of the marketing and sales environment surrounding the retail of hearing aids. Appropriately qualified advisory and therapy staff can supply a range of support services, targeted towards reducing the social, emotional and isolating impact of hearing impairment.

In Victoria, BHA (Vic) endeavours to achieve these outcomes with the support received from the State Government.

c. the adequacy of access to hearing services, including assessment and support services, and hearing technologies;

At BHA (Vic) the Hearing Advisors provide comprehensive assistance to over 650 people a year, and basic information to in excess of 3,500 people. All our services are free of charge. This means we speak to many people who are finding it hard to access other services for financial reasons.

It is our opinion that there is a large number of people who “fall through the cracks” in the Australian system. We acknowledge that the cost of providing a free service and access to free hearing aids and technology to all Australians would be high. However, the economic impact of hearing impaired persons being unable to find work because of their hearing loss is also high.

It is very difficult to find a place where individuals can get a free and independent hearing assessment. BHA (Vic) is one of the few organisations in Australia offering this service. Many hearing aid practitioners offer free hearing tests, but our experience with, and feedback from the public is that they have concerns about engaging with an organisation that they believe wants to sell them a hearing aid. This means that individuals are more inclined to delay having their hearing checked until it becomes much worse, or they are “persuaded” to do so by a family member. Easier access to free, and just as importantly independent, hearing checks for all Australians would encourage people to take action sooner. Perhaps Australian Hearing should have targets that do not include the fitting of hearing aids.

Access to Hearing Aids would seem to be reasonably easy for those who can afford to pay for the services of private hearing aid practitioners. However, our experiences with people fitted privately still points to a lack of counselling services and, in some cases, follow up services for hearing aid users.

There seems to be a culture of selling products rather than helping people deal with their problems. This is not to say that products and technology are not warranted and useful. Nor do we suggest that all hearing aid practitioners are engaging in poor work practices. We are more concerned that the focus of services may be misplaced for many hearing impaired people.

Unfortunately we receive some very disturbing information from some of our service users, regarding their treatment on visiting a hearing aid practitioner. The practitioner can be an audiologist or an audiometrist, and the degree of qualifications does not seem to make a difference. Complaints range from minor ones, such as feeling that the practitioner has little interest in them, to major issues where the client has sought intervention from Consumer Affairs.

Other examples include issues of cost. An inquiry about how much a hearing aid would cost, netted the response, "How much can you afford", and another client was quoted a price which seemed very high so went elsewhere. When the original practitioner called to see why he hadn't been back, he explained that he had the same product for \$2000 less, and was told they would match the price! He asked the "sales person" if he was selling health services or used cars.

Persons receiving hearing aids from the Office of Hearing Services also provide many instances of feeling pressured into "Topping up" when they cannot afford to.

Many of the examples of sales pressure, particularly within the OHS system, lead us to feel that the system is inadequate for both the service provider and the service user.

There is also a general lack of services for people afflicted with Tinnitus.

d. the adequacy of current hearing health and research programs, including education and awareness programs

There is a need for more education about hearing loss and the dangers of loud noise, including music. Although there has been a huge improvement in workplace noise programs because of occupational health legislation we believe there is still room for much improvement in the broader community. This is especially so with regard to recreational noise damage.

Better education programs in school would enable information to be provided at a younger age. iPods, and other MP3 players, once the domain of teenagers, are now being used by younger people.

e. specific issues affecting Indigenous communities.

BHA (Vic) has a policy of inclusion and diversity, which includes provision of services to indigenous communities. However, we find that our current services are not being accessed by the Aboriginal population, and have concerns that this community may not be accessing hearing services generally.

We acknowledge that Indigenous Australians have extended eligibility for the Australian Government Hearing Services program but as with the broader community, it is beneficial for members to know that there are alternative free services that can be accessed. Unfortunately our resources and planning options have limited the provision of services in more remote areas. We believe that a free service of hearing screening, advice, information and support services is beneficial to ALL Australians.

Conclusions

Better Hearing Australia (Victoria) Inc. is fortunate to receive some Victorian State Government funding through the Department of Human Services. This enables free, independent and professional services to be provided to hearing impaired people.

A broadening of this style of service could have significant beneficial effects for individuals with hearing impairment and for the community as a whole. The advantages of these services are:

- They compliment the services offered by hearing aid practitioners and other Audiologists and health care professionals.
- It increases the use of hearing aids (decreases the non-use of hearing aids)
- Informs the community about better communication skills
- Informs the community about hearing health care
- The use of volunteer based not for profit organisations provide the most economical use of funds.