

Attn: Committee Secretary, Senate Community Affairs References Committee

### **Submission to Senate for the Inquiry into Australia's Hearing Health**

As a 23 year old I believe the issue of Generation Y's hearing health is one of great importance. I frequented night clubs and pubs on a regular basis, generally as a venue for social activities with friends. It was not until I recently a club which played particularly loud music that I became aware of the risks of long term hearing damage as a result of this and more specifically of the potentially permanent hearing condition known as tinnitus. My hearing was damaged that evening and I have since sought medical assistance and have learned a great deal about risks to hearing health. This submission will concentrate on the Terms of Reference from a Generation Y perspective and provide recommendations on how to 'get through' to my generation of the risks of exposure to loud music. It will also focus on the culpability of entertainment industries and entertainment venues which seem to operate under less-strict regulations of noise exposure and control when compared with other industries and their venues and workplaces (eg construction sites, airports) which have to operate under very strict OH&S regulations. Consideration of the emerging and future hearing problems for my generation in particular and the significant associated costs to Government and taxpayers, calls for immediate action to be taken to prevent disability. This submission calls for the Inquiry to make recommendations that will help to prevent widespread disability and hearing damage particularly in Generation Y who are at high risk in the current climate of limited regulation of sound emissions in entertainment venues and entertainment devices, and limited public awareness of the risks of hearing damage and preventative measures that can be taken.

#### **a) the extent, causes and costs of hearing impairment in Australia;**

Certain lifestyle factors put Gen Y at high risk of hearing damage. Firstly, there is a culture of regularly socialising in venues which play loud music (live or recorded). While some socialising does occur at private parties (which are regulated by council laws, 'monitored' by neighbours and enforced by police) , by far the majority of such socializing among my generation occurs at venues such as pubs and clubs, where we are exposed to damaging levels of sound (well above the safe recommended decibels).

In addition to the regular entertainment venues, Generation Y regularly attend concerts and festivals where we are exposed to amplified sound that is causing permanent damage to our hearing. It is widely reported and accepted that such concerts cause people's ears to 'ring' or 'hurt' for days afterwards, but there is very little awareness that such exposure can cause permanent and cumulative damage to hearing. There is also little awareness that preventative measures such as quality sound reduction earplugs can reduce the risk of hearing damage, while not interfering with enjoyment of the music and social exchange.

It is also my opinion, that these entertainment venues are subjecting their patrons and staff to excessive levels of noise, without a) sufficient warnings of the risks and effects of this and b) proper observance of current decibel level regulations. Cigarette smoke in venues is no longer tolerated, with regard for the health/wellbeing of staff and patrons. A similar change in attitudes and legislation and public awareness is required for damaging levels of sound in venues which threaten the hearing health of patrons and employees.

Another cause of hearing impairment for this Generation will also come from prolonged exposure to mp3 devices. Although many devices include warnings of the potential for hearing loss if played at high volumes, these warnings are not obvious enough and the potential damaging effects of regular use of these players are not taken seriously. The most popular mp3 device on the market, for example, has a decibel regulator, but it is still capable of emitting up to 100 decibels. According to some resources, exposure to this level of decibels can cause permanent hearing damage after only 15 minutes of exposure. These devices will be the cigarettes and asbestos of Generation Y.

The extent of this damage is far reaching. Many people frequent these venues on a regular basis and you only have to walk down a main street to see the large numbers of people with headphones in their ears.

**d) the adequacy of current hearing health and research programs, including education and awareness programs;**

I believe the current awareness programs on hearing health are very inadequate. I believe my account of this isn't a generalisation based on my knowledge/lack of knowledge on the issue. Many of my peers are equally unaware of the causes of hearing damage. Ironically, the fact that the problem of exposure to dangerously loud music/sound is so widespread - a feature of most cinemas, bars, pubs, clubs and concerts, and a feature of the way MP3 players and gaming headsets are used (i.e. Played loud) – may well cause people to underestimate the harm and risks. People assume that these practices (attending loud venues, listening to mp3 players with excessive volume) are ok and safe. My generation is targeted in social marketing for binge drinking and drink driving, and for the problems/violence associated with this, but many don't know of the risk of hearing loss. The amount of exposure of loud noise to staff working in these entertainment venues is also very worrying. The young people working in such venues are often vulnerable temporary or casual employees with little industrial representation or training. Other industries such as the construction and electrical industries have to comply with very stringent OH&S guidelines. How are the staff in the entertainment industry represented and trained for their roles and the risks associated with the work they are doing? It may well take litigation by (former) staff members of clubs/pubs against venue operators, and against the government/industry regulatory and licensing bodies (which have failed to monitor and police safety standards) for some change in this sector to come about.

**Recommendations**

This isn't about people giving up these things they really enjoy: socialising in venues with friends, listening to music through mp3 devices, going to live concerts: it is about awareness of the dangers of exposing yourself to loud noise, so people can make some informed decisions and about the precautionary steps available to protect your hearing. The venues also have to undergo some strict audits to ensure that patrons aren't being subjected to illegal levels of noise. There is no point in launching a campaign to make people aware of the potential dangers, if clubs and pubs are left to inflict high levels of noise on their patrons. This submission recommends a reform of the current penalty and monitoring processes for venues exceeding this level and the introduction of more thorough moderating systems.

Before finding out about Senate's inquiry into this issue, I had been putting together a campaign on raising awareness amongst my generation of the issues presented in this submission. I would love to

be involved in any capacity in any future campaigns, focus groups or public hearings around this issue. Below I've presented some campaign recommendations which I believe will affect some positive change on this issue.

### **Campaign Recommendations targeting Generation Y**

- Digital/New media is a tool that should be used to reach this generation: Facebook groups and advertisements; and YouTube informational videos. Campaigns on the scale of 'binge drinking' and 'one punch can kill' should be implemented. Outdoor advertising is ideal for generation Y – who may not read papers or watch television. The iPod pedestrian safety campaign (billboard showing a dead pedestrian with the iPod ear chord tracing a line around the body on the road, like a police outline) is a good model for such a communication strategy.
- Universities and schools provide very good access to the target audience and campaigns should be rolled out through these institutions.
- Venue websites and locations should present information/banners advertising the campaign and the effects of loud music without adequate hearing protection.
- Musicians would endorse the importance of protecting your hearing – build some campaigns around these celebrity endorsements, particularly around trying to create a culture around wearing earplugs.
- Rebates on musician earplugs should be introduced to help with these currently expensive precautionary measures - or to reduce costs of such earplugs.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Daniel Lalor', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Daniel Lalor