

I wish to put in an individual submission for the Inquiry into Hearing Health.

Angela Brooks

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This submission addresses one of the Terms of Reference: **C. the adequacy of access to hearing services, including assessment and support services, and hearing technologies.**

I am writing this submission as an adult who has a severe to profound hearing loss since the age of 2. I am therefore in a good position to bring to light the inadequacy of access to hearing services, including assessment and support services and hearing technologies. (For the purpose of this submission, people with a hearing impairment include people with all types of hearing loss as well as those who belong to the Deaf community.)

Once an adult with a hearing impairment reaches the age of 21, they are no longer eligible for access to the excellent services provided by Australian Hearing and that includes access to its highly skilled audiologists. In my case which was over twenty years ago, the ineligibility for this access happened overnight. The security of always having someone professional that I (and my parents), could rely on for all my hearing needs, being suddenly taken away from me was overwhelming and very scary. It was even more so, when it dawned on me that I would now have the financial worry of paying for everything which comes with having a hearing impairment. And this all happens at the vulnerable age of 21 - which for most people is when they are doing further studying, newly employed in the job market or seeking employment.

- **Issue of ineligibility to the audiologists employed by Australian Hearing.** As Australian Hearing is financed by the Government, I was not provided with a list of recommended audiologists to visit, but just a list of private audiologists in my region. Searching for an appropriate audiologist who has experience in dealing with a hearing loss acquired since very early childhood and as severe as mine was very difficult. Most of those audiologists just don't have the experience or perhaps not even the appropriate qualifications. It seems that those audiologists that do have the necessary skills are employed by Australian Hearing! Private audiologists being business minded (understandably so) would naturally focus on their biggest client group - adults with an acquired hearing loss. Addressing the needs of this particular client group is very different from those who were children with a hearing impairment acquired at birth, or during language development or in later childhood.
- **Issue of ineligibility to the services including hearing aids provided by Australian Hearing.** Finding \$5000 to \$7000 to pay for two hearing aids every few years as well as all the extra costs such as the batteries, maintenance, repairs, moulds, tubing, audiologist visits etc, etc, is a huge financial drain and a constant worry to me.

That's my experience and I am one of the lucky ones because I had (and still do) the wonderful support of my family and friends. It's through THEIR support that I have been able to become a socially and financially independent member of the community. The Government (to whom I have been paying taxes for many years) has given me nothing since I turned 21.

Imagine then, what it must be like for those who do not have the family support, the appropriate education, the confidence, the ability to express their needs to audiologists and financial help from family? I understand that there is a disproportionate rate of unemployment amongst those with a hearing impairment to the general population. Moreover, figures show that of those who are employed, a significant number are in low paying jobs (think of those expensive hearing aids). How does the Government think those people get by with resorting to having no hearing aids (or only one which is nowhere near as effective as two) because they can't afford them, inappropriate hearing aids because the audiologists know no better, gaining employment, seeking further education etc. They don't.

I am guessing that the majority end up either on the Disability Support Pension (DSP) or in low paying, unsatisfying jobs. I can't imagine what it must do to their confidence and self esteem .

Continuing the access to the services of Australian Hearing beyond the age of 21 makes good economic sense for the Government. An introduction of an annual fee to take advantage of the services provided by Australian Hearing, is a good start. This annual fee could perhaps increase over a number of years until it reaches its full rate. The idea being that when you turn 21, the annual fee you have to pay is minimal. By allowing continual access to Australian Hearing you will more than likely increase the employment rate. More employment equals less reliance on DSP and other social services. It also means more taxes for the Government. But most important of all, you end up with a healthier, happier and appreciative group of people because they will be more financially and socially independent. Given that the Government is progressing with a Social Inclusion Agenda and it has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities over a year ago - this inquiry could not have been better timed.