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Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia

Submission

Hearing Link Tasmania

About us

Hearing Link Tasmania (HLT) is an arm of the Tasmanian Deaf Society. The Tasmanian Deaf Society is a not for profit charitable organisation. The mission for Hearing Link Tasmania is to provide services for hearing impaired people throughout Tasmania are at risk of becoming socially withdrawn and isolated as a result of hearing loss. We do this in the following ways:

- Provision of free hearing screening services to the community
- Provision of workplace assessments and education
- Education of school children about hearing awareness and protection
- Prescription and trial of assistive listening devices (ALD's) for Department of Veteran's Affairs (DVA) clients and individuals
- Provide support and advice for those affected by the hearing loss through a Tinnitus, Meniere's and Hearing Impaired (HI) support group
- Home visits to individuals
- Extensive Community Education of HI issues through expos and community events

Introduction

Hearing Link Tasmania fully supports any initiatives that will improve public awareness of hearing health and provision of support services for HI people. This submission outlines a range of proposed initiatives which we feel will benefit the hearing health of Tasmanians and assist people with hearing problems to remain contributing members of the Tasmanian community. Articles within the UN Convention on the Rights of People with a Disability, recently ratified by Australia, set out the principles of equal access for people with hearing disability.

Recommendations and Comments

1. That all school children between ages of 8 and 18 have access to annual hearing screenings, which is supported by an education program about hearing health.

Between 2008 and 2009, Hearing Link Tasmania has completed two pilot 'Test and Protect' programs for children at Guildford Young College in Launceston and Deloraine High School. The pilot projects were funded by a grant from Connect Community Foundation.

Research conducted by National Acoustic Laboratories and endorsed by Australian Hearing in 2005 shows that exposure to iPods, walkmans and amplified music and other recreational activities is as damaging to hearing as excessive industrial noise.

In 2005, an Access Economics project examined the economic impacts of deafness and hearing loss on the Australian economy amounting to \$12 billion annually. 36% of hearing loss is due to excessive noise exposure and is preventable.

The research has shown a high level of ignorance among young people of how hearing loss occurs and its long term implications. Hearing loss at a young age seriously affects their short and long term employment prospects.

Findings:

At Guildford Young College, 35 students and 3 teachers were screened for hearing loss. One student was identified as having profound hearing loss and 10 students had significant hearing loss, identified as consequences of loud noise exposure over a prolonged period.

At Deloraine High School, 42 grade nine students and 16 staff received hearing screening tests and of those, 92% advised they had experienced varying levels of tinnitus caused by hearing damage. Of the students tested 33 were identified as having significant levels of hearing loss.

Further presentations about hearing awareness at Friends School (year 6), Hutchins School (year 6-8) and Fairview Primary School (year 5- 6) have shown that over 90% of young people own and play loud music on portable music devices such as iPods.

Costs:

Based on the experiences listed above it is estimated that delivering this program will cost between \$2,000 and \$5,000 per school, depending on availability of resources and the cost of travel, wages etc. Facilities for implementing this program are already available across much of Australia, with organisations involved in industrial hearing screenings and education operating in many areas. Consequently a hearing education and screening program for schools could easily be tendered out by government with its only requirements being oversight and management of the reporting.

Recommendation:

That the Federal Government introduce a program where suitably qualified organisations visit schools and colleges throughout Australia to educate young people about hearing health and to conduct hearing screenings for all children from year 4 to 10.

2. That Assistive Listening Devices (ALD's) be subsidised for all Hard of Hearing Tasmanians who access the Office of Hearing Services

High numbers of Tasmanians are forced to live life without the means to adequately communicate because they don't have the funding or finance to access the currently available technology that could restore their quality of life.

Hearing Aids cost between \$2,000 and \$10,000 per pair, which is far in excess of the ability to pay for people living on a pension or self funded retirees who are asset rich, but financially poor.

Currently only people who hold a Department of Veterans Affairs gold or white card can access hearing aids and assistive listening devices that will allow them to socialise, to conduct normal daily business, to hold down productive jobs. All other people currently miss out.

Recommendation

It is recommended that all Hard of Hearing people who cannot access the Office of Hearing Services (OHS) to gain support for assistive listening devices be able to do so. This process should be means tested so those most vulnerable in our society are more equitably supported.

3. That a study of the hearing health of Tasmanians be conducted

To our knowledge there has never been a comprehensive study of the hearing health of Tasmanians. Empirical evidence suggests that per head of population Tasmanians would have a higher incidence of hearing loss than most other Australian states or territories.

There is a range of influencing factors including: a higher percentage of people in the population who are aged over 65 years, a lack of hearing health education or enforcement by the Tasmanian Government, high incidence of childhood diseases which result in hearing loss or impairment. The problem of hearing loss in Tasmania is unknown and under recognised in the Governments Health agenda, yet hearing loss is well recognised as a high contributor to loss of productivity, reduction in learning capability, depression and suicide and an increase in criminal activity due to misplaced perceptions and the sufferers inability to communicate effectively with the community at large.

Recommendation

That the Department of Health and Human Services work with audiologists, school health programs, industrial health organisations etc to conduct a comprehensive study of hearing health in Tasmania and from that develop a range of recommendations to Government for their consideration.

4. That the Tasmanian Government set up a public audiology service

With the exception of the universal new born hearing screening RHH ENT clinic (one day a week) cochlear implant program, no public audiology services are provided in Tasmania.

Tasmania is the only Australian state or territory without a publicly funded Audiology service. In comparison Queensland has 37 audiologists employed in Public Health with a population of just over 4,300,000. This equates to >8/1 million population which is more than twice the ratio in Tasmania (3.6 per million)

Audiological services considered standard care that is not available in Tasmania includes:

- Monitoring of children and adults receiving ototoxic chemotherapy
- Pre and post operative hearing tests for adults and children having ear surgery
- Audiological assessment of children at risk for fluctuating or permanent hearing loss
- Audiological assessment of adults with chronic medical conditions that predispose them to hearing loss e.g. diabetes

The number of referrals from GP's is expected to increase with the recent introduction of the Commonwealth MBS item numbers for 'Healthy Kids Check'. This check includes "referring the child to an audiologist for a hearing assessment of appropriate".

Recommendation

The development of a service plan and strategy for audiology services with input from key stakeholders which would provide a guide to future service requirements and developments.

5. That resources to enforce current industrial hearing regulations and requirements be developed for Tasmania.

Tasmania currently employs only two workplace safety assessors to cover the entire range of occupational health and safety issues throughout Tasmania. This is clearly inadequate given the wide scope of safety issues faced by industry today. The Tasmanian Government should at the least be hiring a specialised Government Hearing Safety assessor whose position is to assess noisy work places and enforce the current requirements.

Current regulations require that all employees who use hearing protective equipment in their workplaces should receive annual hearing screenings. All other workplaces are recommended to have employees screened once every five years.

Recommendation

That the Tasmanian Government employ a specialist noise assessor whose position is to conduct noise assessments at workplaces and to enforce the regular screening of employees in the work place.