

15 October 2009

To: Committee Secretary  
Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee  
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### **Submission to the Community Affairs References Committee for Hearing Health in Australia**

Please accept our submission to your inquiry. We have a 4 ½ year old son with a moderate hearing loss as well as other disabilities.

With particular attention to the listed terms of reference to the items listed:

#### **The implications of hearing impairment for individuals and the community;**

- There is a huge cost on the family unit through the intensity of input for one child. Early intervention is so important and at the same time the parents also have to educate themselves about something they have generally had little experience. Parents have less time and energy to spend with other siblings – as with any family that has a child with any type of disability. It is a race against time to get speech going as early as possible to minimise long term speech problems. If this is not done there is an ongoing impact on the hearing impaired child, their parents and siblings and also the community through ongoing assistance requirements.
- When our son was diagnosed at Australian Hearing at 8 months old, we were told he had a severe hearing loss. We were given the “Choices” book of information from AH then finished our appointment and went back out onto the street. The AH audiologists were very nice but there was no follow-up to assist us with the shock of being told this news. There was no program to get us into early intervention – no case worker support, no counselling – we were on our own. It was sometime before we could even discuss our sons’ disability without being emotional. It took us a year to determine a pathway forward on what hearing program was best for our son. This would be even harder in country areas. This process needs to be better handled.
- Our son also has other issues that require therapy. These problems have impacted on his progress with regard to speech, hearing and learning through communication. The time

requirements for all these therapies and programs are hard on the child, the parents and siblings. Children with hearing loss often have other issues – the government and support agencies need to recognise this and assist where possible to offer a combined approach so the best outcomes are obtained.

**The adequacy of access to hearing services, including assessment and support services, and hearing technologies;**

- Hearing aids should be subsidized after the age of 21. Children born with hearing loss have a life long cost associated with their disability. One of the large hearing aid manufacturers told us that aids are supported with parts for 5 years from release. This essentially means the life of the aid is 5 years due to technology improvements and obsolescence of the equipment. Hearing aids at \$5,000 a pair over 5 years will require the wearer save \$20 per week to replace their aids every 5 years. Some hearing impaired people have other disabilities which may make the ability to earn a reasonable income difficult and as a result hearing aids cannot be afforded.
- Two FM receivers should be issued by Australian Hearing not just one. This is equivalent to providing someone with a set of glasses where one lens is bifocal and the other is for reading only. New technology enables children to use FM's in a wide variety of situations and kids should be taking advantage of these learning opportunities through both ears. Parents have to support the cost of a second FM receiver which is quite expensive and also needs updating around every 5 years as technology improves.
- More information on current and new hearing aid technology is required through Australian Hearing. It would be difficult for many people to stay abreast of the changes and then advocate different hearing appliances for their children. Hearing aid manufacturers constantly release new products which offer improved capability to their wearers. Children need to be upgraded to the newest technology as soon as possible during the critical learning phase of 0 – 5 years.
- It is a great worry to us that we will lose the support of speech therapy through organisations such as RIDBC and the Shepherd Centre when aided children reach school age. Some children will continue to require ongoing speech therapy and speech pathology well into infants and primary school. Parents are then reliant on the department of education itinerant support. Whilst the itinerant teachers do a fantastic job, there is no substitute for trained teachers of the deaf or speech pathologists. As a result we feel like we are in a race against time to have our child up to a reasonable level before he starts school – unfortunately we think he will still be behind. As a result we will have to find our own private speech

therapist/pathologist, establish a relationship and the pay for ongoing assistance. We strongly advocate that the government should assist with speech therapy/pathology support and it should be continued with institutions such as RIDBC and the Shepherd Centre through infants and primary school for those children who need this help.

- Sound field amplification systems for preschools and schools which have hearing impaired children should be able to be issued to these schools without the need for fund raising. Sound field systems also benefit children with normal hearing.
- There is a very high need for more paediatric audiologists – Australian Hearing are run off their feet. Children take a long time to do audiometric testing. Patience is needed and often children required a high number of visits to “condition” them to audiology testing.
- Web based support sites such as Aussie Deaf Kids, Parent Council for Deaf Education and several others all provide incredibly valuable information and contacts with other parents especially during the initial phases when you are coming to terms with the whole issue of have a child with a hearing loss, then also as you progress through other major events like school, hearing aids and therapy decisions and progress. There needs to be good support to these organisations which I’m sure run on a shoestring budget through many dedicated hours by only a few for the benefit of many.

Thank you for the opportunity to voice our concerns,

Yours sincerely,