

Submission to the
Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

I am speaking with you as the Regional Audiologist for the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services Council.

I have worked for many years in remote parts of Australia and the United States, primarily with Indigenous people. This includes 4 years in Central Australia, 8 years in the Kimberley region of Western Australia and several years with Native Americans in the western U.S. and Alaska.

Undoubtedly by now you would have been made aware of the high incidence of hearing loss related to otitis media (middle ear infections) in Indigenous Australians. Briefly,

- survey after survey over the past 30-40 years have shown that 30-70% of ATSI school aged kids suffer from a significant hearing loss due to otitis media.
- Research from the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin has shown otitis media begins early in life for Indigenous kids, usually within weeks of birth. Contrast this with the average first incidence of OM in non-Indigenous kids occurs at around 8-9 months.
- In Indigenous kids, otitis media usually progresses to more severe forms, which in many cases results in a moderate degree of hearing loss.
- In non-Indigenous kids, otitis media is typically a self limiting process, resolves in a relatively short time and the associated hearing loss is usually only slight or mild.
- Another Menzies study revealed that in remote communities in the NT only 1% of Indigenous kids had normal appearing eardrums at 3 years of age
- Although the Indigenous adult data is less certain, it is estimated that up to 60% of Indigenous adults have hearing loss, in many cases due to the effects of otitis media in childhood.

Hearing loss early in life can have life long negative consequences with the following:

- language development
- socialization
- education, hence literacy and numeracy
- social/emotional wellbeing and self esteem
- training and employment opportunities
- mental health and self harm
- domestic violence
- and as a consequence of the above factors, can be a reason for the over representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system

A major concern of mine are follow-on consequences of long term hearing loss in the first 5 years of life which is the critical period for brain development. The effects of

auditory sensory deprivation from hearing loss can lead to abnormal brain development that is manifested as central auditory processing disorders, or more simply termed, learning problems or listening problems. Even if a person's hearing becomes normal at a later age, these listening problems remain. Consequently they can have significant impacts on adult education, training, and employment.

I need to point out that the above affects are true for anyone suffering long term hearing loss in childhood, and is not exclusive to Indigenous people. But because of the prevalence of otitis media and hearing loss in the Indigenous community, these problems loom much, much larger than in the general community.

I am often asked "why is the rate of otitis media and hearing loss so high in Indigenous people?" Contrary to a common speculation I hear, that there must be some genetic predisposition to otitis media and hearing loss in Indigenous people. There is no proof of this.

The more likely causes of otitis media and hearing loss among Indigenous Australians are related to a myriad of social determinants of health, some of which are housing, overcrowding, nutrition, sanitation, education, marginalization, and so on.

Considerable time and money has been invested in selective primary health care approaches, such as antibiotic administration, immunizations and the like at the expense of approaches from the other end of the primary health care spectrum, that of community education, health promotion and empowerment in the decision making process about health issues.

Fran Baum, an eminent academic and expert in primary health care from Flinders University puts it this way, "What good does it do to treat people's illnesses while giving them no choice but to return to the conditions that made them sick in the first place?"

In summary

- Otitis media and associated hearing loss is a serious health and social problem in Australian Indigenous communities
- Otitis media must be recognized as a chronic disease, and thus be elevated to a status of other chronic diseases in Australia and resourced accordingly
- Having said that, the ultimate solution in reducing the incidence of otitis media and associated hearing loss will not come from the health sector, but from adequately addressing the social determinants that result in poor health outcomes in Indigenous communities
- There is an urgent need to address the social consequences of hearing loss from otitis media in Indigenous communities.

Thank you for this opportunity to share some of my thoughts with you.

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