

Hearing-impaired Australians deserve closed captions on health, welfare and educational DVDs: A Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia

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1. Introduction

This submission addresses an issue that comes within the scope of the inquiry's terms of reference: “(b) the implications of hearing impairment for individuals and the community; (c) the adequacy of access to hearing services, including assessment and support services, and hearing technologies; (d) the adequacy of current hearing health and research programs, including education and awareness programs.”

The issue is about closed captions (CC) on health, welfare and educational DVDs. DVDs equipped with closed captions can display a continuous text transcript of the audio portion of a program as the program occurs on a television or a video screen. Display of the text happens only when a viewer activates closed captions. Any audio-based information on DVDs equipped with closed captions thus becomes fully accessible to hearing-impaired people.

2. Key point of this submission and the recommendation

Health, welfare and educational DVDs that do not have closed captions are of little or no help for hearing-impaired people.

Hence, all such DVDs funded — partly or fully, directly or indirectly — by the public should be equipped with closed captions.

3. Justification for the recommendation

- Nearly 17 per cent of Australian people suffer from impaired-hearing.
- The incidence rate of hearing impairment rises above the 17 per cent level as people get older.
- The incidence rate of some diseases also rises with age. A prime example of such diseases is prostate cancer among men.
- As people get older, they may suffer from more than one disease; for example, men may suffer from impaired hearing as well as prostate cancer.

These facts suggest that hearing-impaired people and their carers will not fully benefit from the DVDs that do not have closed captions.

Australia has many health, welfare and educational organisations who receive government support for their activities. And, many of these organisations produce DVDs but they do not often equip their DVDs with closed captions. Here is an example:

In the last four years, Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia (PCFA) has produced several good DVDs for the benefit of men suffering, or likely to suffer, from prostate cancer. None of those DVDs however had closed captions. Consequently, PCFA's target audience of men and their families and carers — who may also happen to suffer from impaired hearing — cannot properly hear the recorded sound on DVDs. As a result, they are not likely to fully benefit from the information on those DVDs. As a prostate cancer sufferer and a hearing-impaired man, I wrote in early 2008 to PCFA twice to request that it put closed captions on its DVDs. I am still waiting for PCFA's response. I am aware of Mrs Sue Daw OAM, Convenor of Better Hearing

Australia (Canberra Group) writing to PCFA in January 2009 on the same issue, with a follow-up letter in April 2009. PCFA has failed to even acknowledge her two letters, let alone captioning its DVDs. DVDs produced by PCFA continue to lack closed captions.

The PCFA case shows that a serious problem exists and that it needs fixing. And, Australian Government is in a strong position to fix it. Many organisations and individuals apply to the Government to seek funds for various purposes, including for producing DVDs. Before the Australian Government approves funds, it should require all applicants who propose to produce DVDs that they agree to equip their DVDs with closed captions. A decisive action along this line by the Government will go a long way to fixing the problem for hearing-impaired people.

Putting closed captions on DVDs adds to the cost of producing DVDs. However, the benefits gained by hearing-impaired people, their families and carers may outweigh the additional cost.

In the interest of keeping the submission short, I have avoided giving some details, quoting the sources fully and attaching supportive documents. However, if required, I will be happy to supply the needed material.

4. Acknowledgements

Advice from several sources has helped me in preparing this submission. While I alone am responsible for any shortcomings in it, I gratefully acknowledge the help provided by Jim Clough, Haydn Daw, Pete Halsey and Chris Hansen, and by some organisations, namely: Australian Hearing, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Deafness Forum of Australia, and the National Acoustic Laboratories.

5. Sources

Most of the material in the submission is based on the following sources.

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Deafness Forum of Australia, website www.deafnessforum.org.au, accessed 22 March 2010.

U.N. Bhati. The need to equip all health and welfare related DVDs with closed captions (cc): A submission to the [Australian Government's] National Men's Health Policy, Canberra. 25 June 2009.

Wikipedia website, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Closed_captioning, accessed 17 June 2009

6. Declaration of affiliations

I am making this submission in my private capacity as an individual.