



media access
australia

**Submission to the
Senate Committee
Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia**

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Submitted by:

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a) The extent, causes and costs of hearing impairment in Australia

The most recent available statistics show that, as at 2005, 3.55 million Australians had hearing loss. Considering the increase in population between 2005 and 2009, it is likely that closer to 4 million Australians now have hearing loss, approximately one in five. MAA notes that, as a consequence of the ageing population, the proportion of Australians with a hearing impairment and the associated costs, will continue to rise.

MAA notes that there are two particular physiological causes of hearing impairment in people: Conductive hearing loss where middle ear problems inhibit the conduction of sound to the inner ear; and sensorineural hearing loss, which arises from damage to hair cells in the cochlea or to the auditory nerve between the cochlea and the brain.

MAA also notes that while occupational hearing loss is a well established cause of hearing impairment in Australia, the impact of recreational hearing loss, particularly in relation to portable music devices, has not been established through long term studies. Given the rise of portable media devices, such as iPods and hands-free kits for other devices, recreational hearing loss is of particular interest and concern to MAA.

MAA understands that while the direct cost of hearing impairment, related to the diagnosis, treatment and management of hearing loss is less than \$200 per person with a hearing impairment, the real financial cost attributable to hearing loss is estimated at \$3314 per person with a hearing impairment.

For more comprehensive data on these issues, MAA directs the Senate Committee to Access Economics report *Listen Hear! The Economic Impact and Cost of Hearing Loss in Australia* which presents the most relevant and complete data on the extent, causes and costs of hearing impairment in Australia.

b) The implications of hearing impairment for individuals and the community

MAA emphasises the social costs of hearing impairment in Australia which cannot and are not accounted for by financial cost. These costs are particularly pronounced in a number of areas relating to media.

Currently, the vast majority of video content is inaccessible to people with hearing impairments. These people require closed captioning to access video content by helping them follow the soundtrack. Closed captioning, while at increasing levels on some free-to-air television is too low to enable viewing of video for people with hearing impairments in a number of areas:

- Overnight free-to-air television is rarely closed captioned.
- Almost no digital multi-channel programming is closed captioned.
- Sports television programming is rarely closed captioned.
- Subscription television is closed captioned at a very low level. Only 44% of subscription television content, including repeats, is closed captioned.
- Only 55% of DVD video is closed captioned.
- Only 24 out of around 500 cinemas in Australia show closed captioned sessions.

The vast majority of online video services is also inaccessible to people with hearing impairments. Lack of closed captioning in online video will become a much greater social cost as television services moves online. The UK is currently tackling the problem through a review of regulation of video-on-demand services that makes closed captioning and other forms of television accessibility a priority issue.

MAA emphasises that implications of hearing loss in children is particularly pronounced as hearing loss of any degree or nature can severely affect childhood education, particularly speech and language development. Unaddressed, these physiological and educational implications will multiply with age.

c) The adequacy of access to hearing services, including assessment and support services, and hearing technologies

MAA has no comment for this issue.

d) The adequacy of current hearing health and research programs, including education and awareness programs

MAA notes that current education and awareness programs, supporting hearing health and research programs, do not create substantial awareness around accessibility to media. Accessible media is a key means of minimising the social cost of hearing impairment, as it is a key means of including people and fostering communities.

MAA currently undertakes a number of significant education and awareness programs to help people with hearing impairments access media:

- A series of “how to” video demonstrations showing people with hearing impairments how to access closed captions on DVDs, on free-to-air television via a set-top box, on a teletext television, and on subscription television;
- A print awareness campaign to promote closed captioning across a number of media: television programming, DVDs, cinema screenings and theatre performances;
- An awareness campaign to promote accessible cinema, particularly MAA’s campaign *Helping Older Australians Enjoy the Movies: Accessible Cinema*, supported by the Federal Department of Health and Ageing. This includes brochures, a closed captioned trailer for accessible cinema;
- Two websites – www.mediaaccess.org.au and www.yourlocalcinema.com.au that provide up-to-date and comprehensive information on how to get and use accessible content on television, DVDs, cinema, computers, the Internet and other media.
- The *Media Access Report*, a quarterly magazine on the latest news in media access
- The Community Captioning Program, through which MAA applies government grants to closed captioning for DVDs

e) Specific issues affecting Indigenous communities.

MAA notes that preliminary data, the most recent being a systematic review of evidence commissioned by the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, suggests that there is a higher rate of hearing disease and hearing loss in Indigenous people. The Office reported that ear disease, particularly otitis media, and subsequent hearing loss were significant problems among Aboriginal communities. The review also shows that otitis media in Aboriginal children was particularly high – ranging from 10% to 54%. The United Nations rates any level exceeding 4% as a significant public health problem.

One particular issue in media relating to hearing health and Indigenous communities is the lack of captioning on the National Indigenous Television (NITV). This is particularly disappointing, given the high rate of hearing impairment in the Indigenous people. NITV, despite being established through \$48.5m in Federal Government funding in 2005, and despite aiming to preserve Indigenous culture, educating and enriching lives of all Indigenous peoples, fails to provide closed captioning for a substantial audience which has hearing impairment.

