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SUB 34



## **Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia**

**Supplementary submission to the  
Senate Community Affairs References Committee**

**Submission prepared by  
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**in consultation with  
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In providing evidence to the Inquiry into Hearing Health public hearing held in Brisbane on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2009, Deaf Australia's representative, Karen Lloyd, referred to the high incidence of mental health issues among Deaf people and sought leave to send a supplementary submission on this issue. This submission was prepared in extensive consultation with Dianne Briffa, Clinical Specialist in Australia's only professional mental health program specifically for deaf people – the Princess Alexandra Hospital (Brisbane) Statewide Consultation Services Deafness and Mental Health.

### **Implications of Deafness on Life and Mental Health**

A report by Access Economics (February 2006) titled "Listen Hear!: the economic impact and cost of hearing loss in Australia" shows conservatively the financial cost of hearing loss in Australia in 2005 was \$11.75 billion or 1.4% of GDP.

When consideration is made for the following implications for mental health, this cost is considerably more. The above report states that 1 in 6 Australians is affected by hearing loss and this will increase to 1 in 4 by 2050. Of these, 1 in 5 will suffer some form of mental health problem. When looking at Indigenous communities, studies show that up to 60% of Indigenous children will be affected by hearing loss, often due to ear infections (Damien Howard, Phoenix consulting, 2008).

### **Information on Deafness**

Deafness is viewed in many ways, depending on whether a person:

- belongs to a Deaf community which shares a language and culture and sees itself as a linguistic minority, or
- has severe to profound deafness and has been brought up in a 'hearing' world, or
- is born deaf into a Deaf family, or
- is born deaf into a hearing family, or
- has become deaf later in life after the acquisition of a spoken language.

It has recently become evident in Australia that the impact of deafness or hearing loss can be quite traumatic for many people of any age. Studies in Victoria through the Step by Step project<sup>1</sup> identified that young deaf people had difficulties with:

- the sense of belonging within their family;
- accepting deafness and accepting themselves;
- the knowledge and skills to build meaningful relationships;
- how to be successful in life; and
- knowing what mental health is and where to get help if they are struggling.

A recent study in Queensland<sup>2</sup> in which Deaf and hearing impaired adults were asked to identify issues that they believed were associated with deafness / hearing loss, found that problems included the following:

- a loss of self confidence / low self esteem;
- depression – a sense of loss and a sense of not belonging;
- greater anxieties than in the hearing community;
- suspicion and paranoia;
- isolation;
- behavioural problems in children and youth; and
- substance abuse.

The following provides a brief look at some issues that require consideration when looking at implications for the mental health of deaf people.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Mental Health Education Project for Young Deaf People, 1999, Australian Youth Foundation, Vicdeaf

<sup>2</sup> Qld Health 2001, Mental health and Deafness

### **Assistive Listening devices**

Many aids are available, including hearing aids, audio loop systems, FM systems, other amplified listening devices and the cochlear implant. It must be remembered that these devices, although useful for improving hearing in the ear in which they are used, do not give people 'normal' hearing. In fact, even with the cochlear implant, once the processor is taken off at night or when swimming, the person remains deaf.

### **Family**

90 – 95% of deaf children are born into hearing families where the child is not going to hear the spoken language. Parents may choose to bring their child up orally – using only speech and listening for communication. These children often have difficulties communicating with family members.

Many parents do not learn Auslan (Australian Sign Language). They have hearing values where speaking is valued and sign language is not. They view sign language as not being 'normal', and the child grows up believing the same thing.

As a result, these children / adolescents often miss out on the incidental learning and subtle nuances that hearing children have. These important aspects of life provide us with a sense of belonging and self worth. The deaf child often feels isolated within the family setting and has no sense of identity<sup>3</sup>.

Some parents are not aware that a Deaf Community exists and the children may not find out about the Deaf community until they gain some independence in their teens. This 'finding' other people similar to themselves and a language they can use may cause emotional turmoil within the person themselves, as well as in the family.

### **Communication / Language**

Because children are isolated from the spoken language, an obvious implication is that they will have communication / linguistic developmental delays, as well as miss out on forming an understanding of the world, that is available to children in their formative years.

As a result, many of these children become adolescents with minimal language skills, poor social skills, and have difficulty living in a world that is often incomprehensible to them. This can often lead to depression, anxiety, maladaptive behaviours and vulnerability to name a few.

### **Education**

With the closure of many schools for deaf children, many deaf children now do not have the opportunity to meet Deaf children from Deaf families who use Auslan. In the past, this was how deaf children from hearing families learned Auslan and built strong bonds with their deaf peers.

Due to mainstreaming, many deaf children may find themselves the only deaf child in a hearing school, or placed in a special unit with other children of varying disabilities. This again leads to isolation of the deaf child from their hearing peers. Hearing Impaired units in these schools have used Signed English and not Auslan, and often there has been no signing and the child is encouraged to lip read and speak, using a language that they cannot hear. This can often be very difficult for the child in an English based education system.

Some of these children may do well, but many grow up without a good command of the English language. They may read and write at grade 5 level, but also only have minimal sign language skills. Again the child is placed at a disadvantage due to poor English skills and the isolation that comes from being deaf. Being different and isolated leads to poor self esteem in addition to the low literacy levels.

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<sup>3</sup> Creedon P 1996 Mental Health and People who are Deaf, Hearing Impaired or Deafblind. Response to the Strategic Purchasing of Mental Health Services for Young People Project

### **Job Opportunities**

On reaching adolescence, the deaf youth are now faced with trying to find work. Being deaf can be difficult in a 'hearing world' but if the English language level is low, that makes it even harder. Support is often required in completing resumes and finding appropriate work. Support may be through support persons or sign language interpreters. Often interpreters are not provided. Continual disappointments can lead to frustration, anger and depression.

If the deaf person has been brought up orally, anxiety levels become high when going for an interview, for fear that they will misunderstand something and answer incorrectly, or be misunderstood themselves. If this happens, it can lead to a loss of confidence and withdrawal.

### **Social**

Due to difficulties in communication within the family and often without positive role models who are deaf/Deaf, along with the negative view of deafness that these young people have faced throughout life, there may be a tendency for them to under achieve and have difficulty building meaningful relationships.

Social norms may not be understood and often deaf young people who want to be 'normal', can become vulnerable and be abused. Cultural differences, such as touching someone to gain attention, may be misunderstood by a hearing person. If the deaf person has grown up in an abusive family (verbally, physically, sexually), they may believe this is the way life is, and be abusive to others without really understanding that it is wrong. Research has shown that deaf youth are often involved with the police and some end up in prison for this very reason<sup>4</sup>.

### **Cultural**

The Deaf (with a capital D) community share a language (Auslan) and similar values, beliefs and interests. Deaf people who have grown up orally or who have lost their hearing after they have learned how to speak, often see themselves 'on the fence'; not belonging to the hearing world because they're deaf and not belonging to the Deaf world because they don't sign. Again we see the lack of a sense of belonging which can often lead to loneliness, frustration, anger, depression, withdrawal from society and/or abusing substances.

Australian Sign Language (Auslan) is the language used by the Deaf community. This is a language in its own right that uses signs, finger spelling, body movement, space, expression and has its own syntax and grammar. It has been accepted in the Language Services Policy as a language other than English that requires an interpreter, just like any spoken language. However, there is no written form of Auslan. Sometimes Deaf people are incorrectly considered of low intelligence when they write notes, simply because they may write the way they would sign something or as they would say 'in deaf language'.

### **Summary**

In summary, although generalised, many issues that relate to deafness / hearing loss have implications for the mental health of Deaf or hearing impaired people. These can include

- lack of family communication;
- different communication needs;
- delayed development in the crucial formative years;
- low self worth; no sense of belonging;
- poor literacy; underachievement; socially naïve; different perceptions;
- isolation; withdrawal; vulnerability;
- sense of loss; anger; maladaptive behaviours; depression; anxieties; substance abuse.

The cost of mental health issues on top of the \$11.75 billion stated in 2005 as the real cost of hearing loss, will certainly increase.

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<sup>4</sup> Kitson & Hindley 2000, *Mental Health & Deafness*, London.

### **Resources**

The PAH Mental Health Division, Statewide Consultation Service for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing has recently revised and reprinted Guidelines for working with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. This is a valuable resource available either in hard copy and on the web site [http://www.health.qld.gov.au/pahospital/mental\\_health/damh.asp](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/pahospital/mental_health/damh.asp)

### **About Deaf Australia Inc.**

Deaf Australia Incorporated was established in 1986 by members of the Australian Deaf Community. It represents the views primarily of Deaf people who use Auslan (Australian Sign Language) as their primary or preferred language. It is a true consumer organisation – it is the only national organisation that is wholly managed and controlled by Deaf people themselves.

Deaf Australia's mission is to represent, promote, preserve and inform the development of the Australian Deaf community, its language and cultural heritage.

Deaf Australia provides information about Deaf people and practices systemic advocacy on a range of issues of importance to Deaf people of all ages, from birth to old age.

For further information or to discuss this submission, please contact:

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