

8<sup>th</sup> October, 2009

## **Submission for Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia from The Cochlear Implant Clinic at the Royal Victorian Eye & Ear Hospital.**

We present this submission for consideration by the Senate Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia, with particular reference to " the adequacy of access to hearing services, including assessment and support services, and hearing technologies".

Australian Hearing is the government body that supports hearing devices for all children and adult pensioners. This includes traditional hearing aids and cochlear implant speech processors. Cochlear implant speech processors are used by children and adults with severe to profound or total hearing losses. (I.e. the worst degree of losses that cannot be adequately helped with traditional hearing aids.)

In regards to cochlear implant speech processors, both adults and children who are eligible for Australian Hearing services can receive device maintenance, spare parts and repairs. This system of repair and device maintenance is available through Government funding administered by Australian Hearing. However there is a great inequality between what children and adults receive in terms of device REPLACEMENTS and UPGRADES in this system: children can get fully-funded replacement and up-grade speech processors, adults get neither.

Children up to the age of 21yrs are funded for all speech processor replacements eg. if lost, stolen, damaged or worn out and unable to be repaired). Children are also funded for upgrades – based on a clinical needs basis, ie. speech processors upgraded to new technology when clinically proven to be better than the previous model.

For adults, however, if their speech processor is lost, stolen, damaged or worn out and unable to be repaired, there is no funding for a replacement processor. Adult clients of Australian Hearing are expected to fund replacement themselves, and since all are pensioners this is not a realistic or a fair request. This may lead to a situation where some patients could be left without adequate hearing. The current cost of replacing a speech processor is at least \$8050. Most pensioners do not have access to this lump sum given their limited finances.

For adult clients of Australian Hearing there is also no system/funding in place to upgrade to new technology with their speech processor, unlike for the children. This means that some adults are using technology which is 10 to 15 years old. Furthermore, recently the manufacturer, Cochlear Ltd, have advised that some of the older speech processors will no longer be supported. This means that pensioners with older model speech processors will no longer be able to have their processors repaired and therefore will be forced to buy a new speech processor if they want to continue to hear.

A comparison of funding for hearing aids versus cochlear implant speech processor for adult clients of Australian Hearing: hearing aids are replaced when needed, and upgraded to new technology on a clinical needs basis - roughly every 3-4 years, whereas there is currently no public funding for replacement or upgrading of speech processors.

Cochlear implant users represent a very small portion of Australian Hearing clients, however, they have the greatest degree of hearing impairment and therefore communication handicap. Cochlear implants are able to provide them with greatly improved hearing, but this needs to be maintained. The need for secure funding that offers a person optimal hearing for their lifetime is crucial for their well-being and the for the benefit of the community.

**We ask that cochlear implant speech processors be viewed in the same way as hearing aids in terms of the need for funding replacements and upgrades for adults (in a similar way that this is already available for children).**



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