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Committee Secretary
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

BY EMAIL: community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Secretary

SENATE INQUIRY INTO HEARING HEALTH IN AUSTRALIA

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

Our submission makes particular reference to:

- a) the extent, causes and costs of hearing impairment in Australia;
- 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; and
- e) specific issues affecting Indigenous communities.

Additionally, we refer you to our earlier submissions to the following related inquiries:

1. National Broadband Network (I) & (II)
2. Electronic Media Access Inquiry
3. National Disability Strategy
4. National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy

Yours faithfully

Tony Abrahams
Chief Executive

Access Innovation Media

Access Innovation Media (Ai-Media) is a privately owned social enterprise with a track record of developing and delivering innovative, affordable access solutions with global reach for people with disabilities and others with particular access requirements.

We specialise in providing access solutions for people who cannot hear; facilitating their full participation in the social, economic, political and cultural life of our nation.

We currently provide captions on over 40 major television channel brands, deliver live captions for events and workplaces and have developed an in-house solution that provides live remote classroom captioning for deaf and hearing impaired students (currently in Phase II trials).

There is a long way to go before access is widely available for education, employment and social participation settings – but significant progress is being made.

Our R&D team are focused on executing a long term program to develop and extend the capabilities of our world-leading technology to improve the quality, reach, reliability, useability, efficiency and effectiveness of our access solutions – in a broadband-enabled society.

We successfully employ and contract people with disabilities and the modifications to our workplace and business processes that facilitate their inclusion have benefited all staff, and the company as a whole.

1. Extent, Causes and Costs of Hearing Loss in Australia

There is very little awareness in the broad community of the causes or extent of hearing loss largely because (as with other disabilities) community stigma causes many of the people affected to hide or deny their condition with the result that the significant social and economic costs are hidden from view.

1.1 Extent

More than 3.5 million Australians currently experience hearing loss (representing **one in six** people). The incidence of hearing loss is forecast to rise with our ageing population to **one in four** by 2050.¹ This means **8.75 million Australians** will be directly affected by hearing loss by 2050.² These numbers alone imply that hearing health must be elevated to a top national priority.

¹ Access Economics (2006) *Listen Hear – The Economic Impact and Cost of hearing loss in Australia*.

² Based on population forecast of 35 million by 2049. Swan, W., “The Population Challenge and Australia’s Future: Address to formally launch the Australian institute for population ageing research”, 18 September 2009, <http://ministers.treasury.gov.au/DisplayDocs.aspx?doc=speeches/2009/025.htm&pageID=005&min=wms&Year=&DocType=> (Accessed 6 October 2009).

1.2 Causes

The incidence of hearing loss in our community continues to grow along with the proliferation of the sources of noise injury including iPods and in-ear MP3 players, music concerts and festivals, workplace noise, accidents, illness, injury, and ageing. Greater community awareness of the fragility of human hearing must be a top health and education priority.

1.3 Costs

Access Economics estimates the total costs of exclusion because of deafness in the Australian economy exceed **\$12 billion per annum**.³ The human costs of excluding people from education, employment and social participation opportunities, simply because they cannot hear, are even more striking.

Early intervention and a genuine commitment to education access are both critical to delivering lifelong inclusion for people with hearing loss. As the National Disability Strategy Consultation Report, *Shut Out*, notes, the educational experience of people with disabilities are all too often characterised as “The Wasted Years”. The report notes that while there is no way to measure the exact social and economic cost of failing to ensure young people with disabilities have every opportunity to learn, it is certain that failing to provide them with education limits their potential to lead productive, independent adult lives.⁴

We do know that deaf children are 2.4 times less likely to complete high school than their hearing counterparts and 160,000 people are out of work and many of these are on the Disability Support Pension because we don't have a system that facilitates their inclusion in the workplace.⁵ All these costs are set to continue to increase on a “do nothing” path, in line with the demographic changes identified in section 1.1 above.

2 Implications of hearing impairment for individuals and the community

2.1 Individual implications

People who are deaf can do anything except hear.

However, an inability to hear too often excludes individuals from *any* meaningful participation in the social, economic and cultural life of the community. Given the ubiquity and convenience of audio-based communications in the general community

³ Access Economics (2006).

⁴ Commonwealth of Australia (2009) *Shut Out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia*.

⁵ Access Economics (2006).

(family, education, workplace, entertainment, health, transport and social settings) a lack of access to these communications is profoundly disabling.

While medically-grounded technology continues to improve, there is no prospect that hearing impairment can be medically reversed in the foreseeable future. The implication of this is that solutions to the widespread problem of hearing loss should be centred around **access solutions** that translate audio-based information visually.

This can be done in 2 main ways:

1. **Sign language:** For the 7,000 Deaf Australians who know and use Auslan⁶, sign language interpreters are effective in many situations. Auslan is a language distinct from English with its own vocabulary, syntax, grammar and sentence structure. Auslan interpreting does not give direct access to the spoken words and nor does it build literacy. The effectiveness of Auslan interpreting depends on the availability and skill of the interpreters, their Auslan capabilities, and (importantly) their subject matter knowledge. Remote interpreting can improve efficiency (by making interpreters available for more appointments throughout the day) but this solution depends on high bandwidth connectivity at both ends. Auslan interpreting is to be preferred over captioning where the client has poor literacy.
2. **Realtime Captioning:** Captioning delivers realtime textual representation of the spoken word to the hearing impaired client. Recent advances in technology have allowed realtime captions to be displayed to more devices in more places with greater convenience. This trend is set to continue. Captions are useful for the 3.5 million hearing impaired people in Australia (providing they are literate and have access to a display device). The required Internet connectivity to stream text is relatively small. Methods of generating text include stenography machines, keyboard and speech recognition. The availability and financial viability of these services continues to improve. With political will and funding, every deaf child in Australia could have access to live remote captioning solutions in every classroom once the National Broadband Network is built. Ai-Media have recently launched a training program called Ai-Skills to train and accredit speech captioners to deliver remote captioning solutions for a variety of specialised subjects and settings.⁷

Failing to deliver access (either through medical or technological solutions) has enormous costs to individuals well covered in *Shut Out*. Without access to the broader community people become excluded from mainstream society. People's mental health and quality of life suffer. Exclusion inevitably leads to feelings of alienation, being forgotten, neglected, hidden, rejected, discriminated against, abandoned and isolated. It is the lack of access, rather than the physical impairment, that all too often leads to debilitating depression.

⁶ 2006 Census as reported in Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auslan>

⁷ For more information on Ai-Skills, see www.ai-media.tv.

2.2 Community implications

Our major challenge as a community is to recognise, harness and deploy the unique talents of each individual to the betterment of society as a whole. Systematic exclusion of people who cannot hear from Australian society means that we all miss out on the potential contributions of these talented individuals – especially if we fail to deliver them appropriate education. Would the world have missed out on Stephen Hawking if he was born in rural NSW and could not hear?

The legacy issues of fear and social stigma surrounding disability must be transformed to a culture welcoming of difference and celebrating the benefits of diversity. With Australia's recent ratification of the International Convention on the Rights of People with Disability (DisCo), there is an obligation to prioritise access and inclusion in domestic law.

In beginning to provide for access and inclusion, new sustainable industries will develop, generating employment and skills growth and increasing productivity by freeing up people with disabilities and their unpaid carers to contribute to the broader economy and overcoming the direct costs of exclusion referred to earlier.

For example, we estimate that providing realtime remote captioning for Australia's 10,000 deaf kids would cost around \$300 million per annum and generate up to 20,000 new sustainable jobs (many in rural and regional areas suitable for people with disabilities). Failure to provide education access will result in a *certain* increase in the \$12 billion annual cost of exclusion. The costs of acting are dwarfed by the costs of continued inaction.

Delivering access and inclusion is an issue of human rights, social justice *and* economics.

3 Adequacy of access to hearing services, including assessment and support services and hearing technologies.

The inequity surrounding access to and funding of hearing services including support services and hearing technologies based on age, state, region, stage of life, educational institution, employment status, employer, source of disability, personal financial means and insurer must urgently be addressed.

All effective hearing services must be funded. As noted in *Shut Out*, all too often more energy is spent rationing services than providing them. Existing arrangements that provide no assistance for hearing aids for people of working age and allocate the costs of access services to an employer must be reformed if we are to increase the participation and inclusion of people with hearing impairments.

If we are to encourage employers to hire people with disabilities we must first remove all existing financial disincentives to doing so.

Ai-Media strongly supports the establishment of a no-fault National Disability Insurance Scheme to fund whole-of-life solutions required to deliver effective access and inclusion

for people with disabilities (including those with hearing loss). These services should begin with universal newborn hearing screening and cover early intervention programs, education and employment access as well as aged care.

4 Adequacy of current hearing health and research programs, including education and awareness programs

While there is always a need for continuing research into hearing health, we believe the most pressing priority is the communication and dissemination of existing knowledge on hearing health to the community at large.

Given the prevalence and projected increase in the incidence of hearing loss this should be a general education and awareness campaign targeting people most at risk by identifying the sources of noise-related hearing injury and steps that can be taken to mitigate hearing loss.

There is a further role to make people aware of resources including medical testing and assistive technologies (such as captioning on television and at cinemas) that can improve the quality of life of those with hearing loss and their families.

5 Specific issues affecting indigenous communities

With the incidence of hearing loss being far higher in indigenous communities (up to 85% in some areas according some media reports⁸) particular attention must be given to the unique needs of indigenous communities and hearing health. Of particular concern is the early onset and persistence of otitis media.

Further complications arise as “[t]hose affected by hearing loss are themselves often not aware of their disability, usually ascribing their communicative difficulties to not speaking English properly, cultural differences or others’ antagonism to them personally or Aborigines generally.”⁹

The implications for indigenous education are clear. We must prioritise indigenous hearing health from early childhood by delivering solutions tailored to the specific conditions of each community.

⁸ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/02/27/2174372.htm>

⁹ Howard D., Quinn S., Blokland J., and Flynn M., “Aboriginal Hearing Loss and the Criminal Justice System” (1993) Aboriginal Law Bulletin 58 at <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AboriginalLB/1993/58.html>