



Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into hearing health in Australia

Australia's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was heralded as a significant step in advancing the social and economic standing of people with disability. Embracing it will, however, require significant action. Many Australians with disability cannot currently exercise their rights because they cannot get the supports they need—including access to the assistive technology that would assist in their participation in community life and employment. The Convention, with its extensive prescription of rights, will become a reference point for review and reform.

NDS is pleased an inquiry into hearing health in Australia is underway—the impact it has on individuals, families and the wider community has not received the attention it warrants. Raising the awareness of the impact the condition has on people's lives, and improving the availability of appropriate supports, services and treatments are required.

Response to a selected Term of Reference

- ***the adequacy of access to hearing services, including assessment and support services, and hearing technologies***

The potential impacts of hearing impairment—social stigma; difficulties at school; social isolation; reduced employment and leisure options—on the quality of life of many people cannot be under-estimated. While improved research and treatment is required, it is frequently the non-medical aspects which have the ability to significantly improve the lives of people living with the condition. In particular, good access to services and (affordable) technologies enables people to be more productive and engaged at school and work, and be more independent at home.

At the broadest level, the engagement of people with hearing impairment would be greatly facilitated by expanding the coverage of captioning for people who are hearing impaired. This facility is vital if the one in six Australians who currently have some form of hearing impairment are to access entertainment and informational electronic media.

NDS supports the need for greatly increased captioning of television programs, DVDs of television programs, and downloadable material. The installation of hearing loops, captioning and audio description should also be encouraged and facilitated in public venues, and the quality of captioning should be captured in industry guidelines (with a mechanism established to enable complaints to be made about poor captioning).

The ability to make and receive telephone calls is a community norm; people with hearing impairment must be able to access this basic service. To support this, NDS believes that Captioned Telephony should be made widely available as soon as possible (and be affordable). This technology, which allows written captions to appear simultaneously with the spoken word, would benefit millions of Australians (the person with a hearing loss as well as those who wish to communicate with them). The isolation experienced by many people with hearing loss would be reduced—users could remain actively engaged in the economy as a consumer or an employee, and would be able to remain in telephone contact with families and friends. The growing numbers of Australians with hearing loss (associated with the ageing population) makes this technology urgently needed. In particular, for people who lose hearing in later life Captioned Telephony—as its pattern and extent of usage in the USA shows—is much more accessible than TTY.

More specifically, NDS believes that particular attention needs to be given to assist children with hearing impairment to achieve good educational outcomes. Inclusive education practices for children with disability can greatly improve their educational outcomes and social outcomes. The difficulties that can be associated with hearing impairment highlight the importance of providing a supportive and inclusive environment for these children. As well as providing them with the best possible opportunities to learn, relationships with their peers need to be supported and prioritised.

A concept such as the ‘life needs model’¹ approach to supporting children, young people and their families would help bridge the issues which families and schools acting alone have difficulty managing. The National Unified Lifeskills Model² is an Australian example of this approach developed specifically for children with vision impairment: its principles are broadly applicable to children with all forms of disability, and should be easily adapted for children with hearing impairment. The model brings families, educators, therapists and service providers together to maximise the independence and potential of the child. Collaboration is vital if children with disability are to develop the life-skills they need to succeed.

¹ See *Life Needs Model of Pediatric Service Delivery* Thames Valley Children’s Centre, Ontario, Canada <http://www.tvcc.on.ca/gateway.php?id=337&cid=0>; and <http://www.nulm.org>

² www.nulm.org

Improved employment support is also critical. Employment provides people with income, a mechanism to contribute to society's economic well-being, and opportunities for social engagement; it engenders feelings of satisfaction, achievement and contribution. People with hearing impairment should not be denied these benefits and opportunities. Disability employment services, including specialist services for people who are deaf or hearing impaired, are well placed to provide the specialist assistance some people with hearing impairment require to find and maintain employment. The availability of support services and hearing technologies are critical to sustainable employment outcomes for many people with disability; these must be adequately funded. Furthermore, research to identify the most effective strategies and supports for improving employment outcomes for people who are deaf or hearing impaired is required.

October 2009

Contact: Dr Ken Baker
Chief Executive
National Disability Services
Ph: 02 6283 3200
Mbl: 0409 606 240

About National Disability Services

National Disability Services is the peak industry body for non-government disability services. Its purpose is to promote and advance services for people with disability. Its Australia-wide membership includes about 650 not-for-profit organisations, which support people with all forms of disability. Its members collectively provide the full range of disability services—from accommodation support, respite and therapy to community access and employment. NDS provides information and networking opportunities to its members and policy advice to State, Territory and Federal governments.