



# Australian DeafBlind Council

Australian DeafBlind Council (ADBC)

Submission: Senate Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia

Additional Attachment

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## **Cochlear Implants**

Deafblindness creates overwhelming barriers to communication and mobility which can have a devastating impact on ones independence, self-esteem and ability to participate in the wider community, leading to social isolation and poor mental health.

Most people with deafblindness are not totally blind or totally deaf and this leads to the need to create a method of communication that suits each individual. People with deafblindness communicate by a wide range of methods. The range and combination of impairments results in a diverse range of different communication needs and abilities with some people benefiting from cochlear implants.

The cochlear implant is a highly technical medical device designed to bypass damaged parts of the inner ear and send electrical stimulation directly to the auditory nerve, where it is then interpreted as sound by the brain. The implant is put in place surgically.

The device provides the potential for useful hearing sensation and improved communication ability for people who have a severe to profound sensory neural hearing loss.

Cochlear implants may provide an important option for individuals who receive little or no benefit from a conventional hearing aid.

Approximately 90% of the information we receive about the world comes through our vision and hearing. A person with deafblindness experiences the world through using residual vision and hearing, and by using touch smell and taste to make sense of the world.

Without this important tool in utilising residual hearing a person with deafblindness may experience difficulty accessing the community (orienting themselves, moving safely and communicating with others). For example safety issues would include not hearing cars approaching and dogs barking. Communication issues such as people talking from behind may be unworkable without a cochlear implant.

The cost of the cochlear implant is high, approximately \$9,000. Children up to the age of 21 years are funded for upgrades however currently an adult over the age of 21 in Australia is entitled to one upgrade during their lifetime. With a life

expectancy of an implant between 5-10 years this amount is proving out of reach of people who are deafblind.

For most people who are deafblind finding employment is difficult and if they are not in some form of supported accommodation or living with their parents they generally live off the pension so any cost is important. For those few who may be perceived as fortunate to have employment, communication with staff and co-workers is often extremely limited making their experience of work very lonely and isolated. Much of the adaptive technology such as Braille, CCTV, Loop and most importantly cochlear implants are expensive and out of reach of the majority of deafblind people.

As a result of the high costs of support and lack of qualified support services Deafblind people face significant barriers accessing basic services and activities such as:

- health or medical services
- news, current affairs and advertising
- education and training
- employment

and experience difficulties:

- communicating with friends and family and basic socialisation
- living
- relationships
- access to aides and equipment

The impact of such social exclusion often results in Deafblind people experiencing:

- grief and loss
- isolation
- poor mental health (depression and anxiety)
- frustration
- fatigue
- low confidence and self-esteem
- a reduced quality of life

The issue of funding upgrades for cochlear implants in adults is one of critical importance moving forward. Because the costs associated with deafblindness have a serious impact on the living standards of this group of people, including health, **it is suggested ways of reducing these costs be reviewed as a matter of urgency.**