

**Community and Public Sector Union**  
Nadine Flood • Deputy National Secretary

Friday, 9 October 2009

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

Email: [community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Madam/Sir,

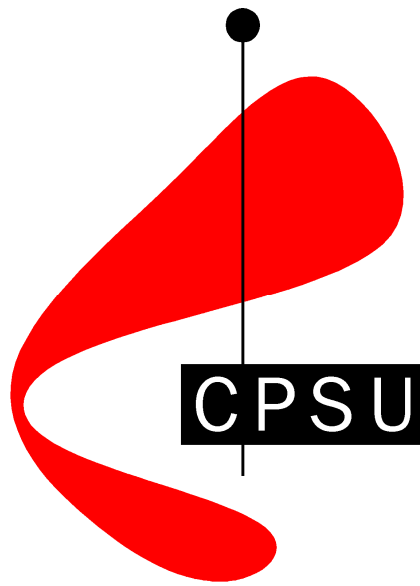
### **Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia**

Please find attached a supplementary submission from the Community and Public Sector Union (PSU Group) to the Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia.

The CPSU thanks the Committee for the opportunity to comment on these issues. If you wish to discuss this submission the contact person is Tim Dymond, CPSU Research officer, telephone (02) 8204 6901, email [tim.dymond@cpsu.org.au](mailto:tim.dymond@cpsu.org.au).

Yours sincerely,

Nadine Flood  
Deputy National Secretary



**CPSU submission to:**

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

**October 2009**

## **Introduction**

The PSU Group of the Community and Public Sector Union ('CPSU') represents workers in the Australian Public Service ('APS'), Commonwealth Government statutory agencies, the ACT Public Service, the Northern Territory Public Service, Telstra, the telecommunications sector, call centres, employment services and broadcasting including ABC and SBS.

The CPSU has members working as health professionals in Australian Hearing, as well as other Human Services portfolio agencies.

The CPSU thanks the Senate Community Affairs References Committee for the opportunity to make this submission on behalf of our members in Australian Hearing.

## **Reasons for the submission**

CPSU members working for Australian Hearing are dedicated professionals seeking to deliver high quality client focussed hearing health services to the whole community. Members have identified three key areas that must be addressed to ensure that the services provided by Australian Hearing remain high quality. These are:

1. The workloads of current Australian Hearing staff and the provision of client focussed services;
2. Access to hearing services and retaining a client focus;
3. The education and training of hearing health professionals who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

## **The workloads of current Australian Hearing staff and the provision of client focussed services**

The CPSU has consulted with members at Australian Hearing about their concerns as health professionals in the hearing services sector. Most agreed that health professionals at Australian Hearing have excessive workloads that adversely affect their ability to deliver appropriate client focussed services, specifically by limiting both their consultation times, and the time available for writing reports following consultations.

### ***Consultation Times***

Australian Hearing employees reported that on average, they have around 45 minutes to consult with clients. Most members reported that consultation times were not long enough to adequately service their client's hearing health needs. One member noted that the implications included:

*increased work hours, cutting corners, not adequately discussing hearing aid options with clients and often having insufficient time to complete a detailed enough COSI. (Client Orientated Scale of Improvement – a procedure for evaluating the outcomes of rehabilitation).*

Another member observed that short consultation times mean that *'client's needs are not addressed appropriately'*.

*Some clients need more than a prescriptive approach. To become a successful user of rehabilitation, they need more counselling which cannot be done when time is short.*

Members indicated that client consultation times should be determined by the nature of appointment, not the workload of the specialist. For example, testing and fitting often required appointments of at least 60 to 75 minutes or longer.

### **Writing Reports**

Many members indicated that they had between 30 and 45 minutes to write reports following client consultations. Most suggested they did not have enough time to adequately write up reports on their client's hearing issues. As is the case with consultation times, report writing times should be determined by a client's specific needs. Members described circumstances where reports were written later in the day or week when *'it is hard to recall specific problems raised by the client'*. One member summarised the effect as report writing time being 'stolen' because clients were booked into times that should be set aside for reporting in order to generate revenue.

Other issues associated with insufficient report writing times included:

- Long working hours (e.g. arriving early, staying late – with no overtime available).
- Miscommunication/poor recording of a client's specific needs.
- Inadequate attention given to individual clients.

The CPSU acknowledges that 'time' is a precious resource for service delivery agencies across the public sector. However in health areas having the time to properly provide services is not simply an issue of staff having better time-management practices.

The CPSU proposes that the Committee's final report should:

- **Recommend that Australian Hearing be properly resourced to provide quality client focussed services, in particular to provide for adequate consultation and report writing times.**

### **Access to hearing services and retaining a client focus**

The Terms of Reference for this Inquiry include examining *'the adequacy of access to hearing services'* in Australia. Currently Australian Hearing only provides services to particular members of the community, e.g. Community Service Obligation (CSO) families and children. CPSU members are committed to assisting those who currently form the client base, however they have also suggested that hearing health in Australia would benefit from Australian Hearing being able to provide services to a broader range of clients. For example one member commented that:

*I would like to see Australian Hearing provide services to anyone drawing a payment from Centrelink, and keep going with the children, we have so many people on unemployment / newstart etc which would like to access our services but cannot.*

Another member suggested that allowing Australian Hearing to provide services to a broader range of clients would be of particular benefit to people in regional areas:

*We have a wealth of expertise and also strong community visiting programs in regional areas. Access to our services would be appreciated by those who have to travel a long distance to access a private provider, when we provide a visiting service.*

A small number of members argued that smaller client base puts restrictions on agency revenue:

*We are encouraged to create top-up revenue because we cannot make up the revenue in private sales, if we were able to create this larger client base we would not need to be pushing so hard to make sales from low-income earners.*

However any change in the client base of Australian Hearing must be carefully considered to ensure that services to the existing client base are not compromised. For example, CPSU members employed by CRS Australia provide services in a contestable market. Therefore, the pressures to ensure the organisation remains profitable has meant that the quality of service provided to unemployed people with a disability or mental illness is compromised – maintaining a level of quality service to these citizens relies on the goodwill of the staff. Rather than expose Australian Hearing to a contestable market where there is a risk that the traditional client base will give way to those who can afford to pay, it is incumbent upon government to ensure that Australian Hearing is properly funded.

The CPSU proposes that the Committee's final report should:

- **Recommend that any proposals to increase the community's access to hearing services be matched by the necessary level of resources to retain a client focus for the most vulnerable.**

### **The education and training of hearing health professionals who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders**

The CPSU's Governing Council has adopted an action plan called the *Agenda for Change*, which includes a goal to 'increase employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Commonwealth and Territory public sectors and large private sector organisations'.

The CPSU commends Australian Hearing for including in its 2007 Reconciliation Action Plan a goal to 'increase the number of Indigenous employees working for Australian Hearing'. The CPSU also welcomes the

inclusion of increased training of health workers to help early diagnosis of hearing problems in the \$58.3 million the Commonwealth has allocated for eye and ear health.

The Commonwealth must allocate resources to specifically educate and train hearing health professionals from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. CPSU members in Australian Hearing have suggested measures such as work experience initiatives, specialist graduate programs and scholarships to attract Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the hearing professions. Member comments included:

*If you have ... committed Indigenous individuals interested in becoming an audiologist, the cost and time required to do the training can be a huge hindrance. Therefore, providing financial assistance ... will be a huge assistance ...*

*Aboriginal and Torres Start Islanders could be supported remotely to carry out much work to improve hearing health in remote communities.*

*It is very difficult often to move from your community to study. An understudy, learn on the job type arrangement would probably make it more achievable for students.*

The Committee's final report should:

- **Recommend that the Commonwealth takes active measures to increase the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Islander Hearing Health professionals.**

## **Conclusion**

Employees at Australian Hearing are dedicated to improving the essential services the public sector provides to the community. The CPSU welcomes this Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia, and thanks the Committee for the opportunity to comment.

### ***The Committee's final report should:***

- **Recommend Australian Hearing be properly resourced to provide quality client focussed services, in particular to provide for adequate consultation and report writing times.**
- **Recommend that any proposals to increase the community's access to hearing services be matched by the necessary level of resources to retain a client focus for the most vulnerable.**
- **Recommend that the Commonwealth takes active measures to increase the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Islander Hearing Health professionals.**