

5 October 2009

Re: Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia

To the Senate Community Affairs Committee:

Please find below my submission to the Hearing Health Inquiry.

I am a proud Deaf man working professionally in Australia. I come from a Deaf family where sign language is our first language. Then English was learned later in my life through both, spoken and written. I am also a very proud Dad to a Deaf son.

At last we have arrived to this opportunity to respond to the Hearing Health Inquiry. We are well into the 21st Century and there is no excuse anymore for the Government and Australian society to prevent me or my son and his friends to be able to live in Australia inclusively.

We are by far excluded across many areas of our life in Australia today. This is quite unfortunate.

This can be changed. Let us change now.

There are a number of issues I would like to highlight here based on personal experiences as a Deaf person as well as my son's future.

Hearing Health

(Diagnosis, management, support services and access)

My son was diagnosed with a bilateral hearing loss through the NSW SWISH program, a newborn hearing screening. Without that screening, I would not have known my son's hearing status in order to provide appropriate assistance and intervention. I happen to be very fortunate to be living in a city and in a state that provides newborn hearing screenings for all babies however it pains me to know that this does not happen everywhere in Australia.

Recommendation:

The Federal Government to implement Universal Newborn Hearing Screening standards in Australia providing diagnoses at early age.

Unfortunately there is a gap between the detection of hearing loss to early intervention program and services in Australia. My son is lucky because I knew where to access appropriate early intervention programs and what kind of program I wanted for my son but I know this is not the case for many parents across Australia particularly in remote areas.

Recommendation:

Early Intervention Programs are available with appropriate support for parents and families through informed choices of various pathways for the child/children.

It is my greatest fear when my son turns 21 where he cannot afford new hearing aids and batteries. He currently gets hearing services through Australian Hearing. I have this constant reminder to keep saving money for my son in the future, a college fund...perhaps this fund will need to go towards his hearing aids expenses instead (he has two!).

Recommendation:

Subsidised services should be offered to all Australians who need hearing aids or cochlear implants between the ages of 21 and 65 if they are on a low income, full-time students, or part-time students.

My hearing aid died a few weeks ago, and I had to buy a new hearing aid. As a working age father, I rely on my hearing aid in my workplace and cannot survive without one. It is without question for me to not get new hearing aids. Both hearing aids cost me \$7,500 – money I simply do not have. There is no tax incentive nor is there a voucher scheme for people like myself.

It is a shame that now my son's college fund will have to be on hold. There will be no family holiday this Christmas because of how much my hearing aids cost me.

Recommendation:

A voucher scheme in place (similar to the UK Model) for all Australians with a disability to cover personal expenses every year ranging from:

- *hearing aid,*
- *cochlear implants,*
- *batteries,*
- *TTY(s),*
- *Webcams.*
- *hearing devices (such as doorbell light flashing), or*
- *baby crier machine (ours cost us \$800) etc.*

This voucher scheme may also include expenses on using Auslan interpreters or real-time captioning for personal appointments.

Tax-deductible equipments should be incurred for people who pay from out-of-pockets such as hearing aids or batteries or any expenses related to hearing loss.

It is already expensive being "deaf" but it should not be an "expense" but an incentive on both, the Government and people with a hearing loss.

If I do not work, and among many of my other peers who do not work, this will have an impact on Australian economy. The return on the GDP will be lost. It is the Government's responsibility to help balance the workforce by providing accurate support and services for deaf people to boost the economy. It is a two-way street.

Accessing the workplace is always a great challenge, let alone for those who cannot hear. Finding a job is always tough and barriers are there because employers could not afford interpreters or know how to communicate with them.

Recommendation:

Auslan for Employment to be extended for all ongoing employment for people who are deaf who rely on interpreters and services available for Real-Time Captioning for Employment as well.

The abovementioned issues are not the only problems we confront every day. They are the few examples I can give, but there are many more issues we deal with each day. My son and I rely on Australia's beautiful surrounding and leisure activities to maintain our lifestyle. Taking him to the Aquarium is a disappointing experience when we have to pay in full just like others, but we could not understand the Crocodile Show or able to listen to stories that are pre-recorded in the background.

Staying in a remote motel on the coast on the way up to Brisbane, we could not watch television because there is no captioned TV nor do we get a discount. We have to pay in full for our accommodation. Is this fair? Is this justice?

At home, we have to search for programs that are captioned. Not all children TV programmes are captioned and it is frustrating sometimes. Being a stay-home Dad, I find TV very uninviting because daytime TV shows are usually not captioned. This same goes for DVDs, not all DVDs are captioned. It can be a daunting experience when my son wants a DVD to watch and for me put it back on the shelf at the video store. For him to throw a tantrum and for me to explain that this DVD is not accessible. This should not happen. It is not fair on my son.

Am I enjoying my lifestyle to its fullest like my neighbors? The answer is no. Not today. Can this happen tomorrow? Yes. I am counting on you. My son is counting on you.

Let's change now.

Thank you for reading my submission.

Sincerely,

Alex Jones