

Submission to Senate Community Affairs Committee Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia.

With reference to:

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

I am the mother of a 15yo daughter with a profound hearing loss and bilateral cochlear implants. My daughter was a participant in the research project that helped define the benefit of bilateral implants and which led to bilateral implants being offered as the principal pathway for profoundly deaf children who choose an oral method of communication.

My daughter attends a school with a deaf integration program. She is an engaged, enthusiastic student who achieves above average academically, plays sport, is involved in social justice programs and has a part-time job at a fast food 'restaurant'. She expects to attend university and ultimately join the full-time workforce and become a tax-payer. She has few restrictions on her quality of life because of her cochlear implants. Without them however, her life would be very different - it would be significantly more difficult to achieve her goals in life.

With all of this in mind, I cannot speak highly enough of the hearing services offered to her as a child living in Melbourne. At all points along the pathway from her diagnosis of a profound hearing loss just before her first birthday until now, we have been helped by caring professionals and supported financially by the Australian Government through Australian Hearing and the Cochlear Implant Clinic at the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital. The situation will change however once she is no longer a child/fulltime student.

My daughter's cochlear's implants, like all technology, will not last forever. As a child under the umbrella of Australian Hearing, she has received an update of the external component of one of her implants approximately 5 years after the initial one was received and we are very grateful for this. This external component, the speech processor, costs approximately \$8000. When she is no longer a child, she will need to find \$16,000 in today's dollars to replace her speech processors. While this will not need to be done every year by any means, it will need to be done at regular intervals, perhaps every 3 - 5 years, to have access to technology without which she will struggle to continue to be a contributing member of society.

The Access Economics 2006 report 'Listen Hear – The Economic Impact and Cost of Hearing Loss in Australia' states that the lost earnings of individuals with a hearing loss is the greatest financial cost associated with hearing loss in Australia accounting for 56.7% of the costs associated with this condition (p67). In 2005, the real financial cost of hearing loss was estimated at \$11.75 billion (p5). In contrast, the direct health costs including hearing aids and cochlear implants account for only 5.7% of the financial costs associated with hearing loss in Australia (p67).

The number of people with a profound hearing loss is small, and the advent of the cochlear implant has made previously unimaginable changes to their expectations in life. Most children with cochlear implants can expect to complete their education and become contributing members of our society in both financial and community ways. My daughter's socialisation, her ability to function in society without assistance, has

been 'normalised' by her ability to hear. To continue to achieve this however, children such as my daughter need to have access to working technology.

I fear for the ability of my daughter and other children like her to fund the necessary technology to maintain a 'normal' adult lifestyle. These are children who have had to deal with many issues in their lives, issues that children with normal hearing do not have to face. And then when they do manage to overcome all the obstacles that life has put in their way, they face the prospect of regularly having to find large sums of money to purchase the technology needed to continue to have a normal life. This seems very unfair as well as being poor economics.

The Access Economics 2006 report states that 'people with hearing loss are 25% less likely to be earning higher incomes than people without hearing loss' (page 52) – those most in need are those least likely to be able to afford technology. People with severe or profound sensory hearing losses comprise only a small minority of people with a hearing loss but are the sector most in need of technology to help live in and contribute to our society. In addition to the issue of a massive loss of productivity, hearing loss can lead to significant decreases in quality of life, decreases which can also be mitigated by appropriate technology.

I ask this Committee to consider recommending, for those such as my daughter, that financial assistance to purchase essential technology be provided throughout their working lives to meet up with the assistance which I understand is offered to those on the Aged Pension. I would envisage "essential technology" to include batteries needed to operate the hardware as this is a significant cost on an on-going basis.

With many thanks for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry

Barbara Hockridge