



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

COMMITTEES

Community Affairs References Committee

Report

SPEECH

Thursday, 13 May 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 13 May 2010
Page 3
Questioner
Speaker Siewert, Sen Rachel

Source Senate
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Senator SIEWERT (Western Australia) (10.57 am)
 —I present the report of the Community Affairs References Committee *Hear Us: Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia*, together with the *Hansard* record of proceedings and documents presented to the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Senator SIEWERT—I seek leave to move a motion in relation to the report.

Leave granted.

Senator SIEWERT—I move:

That the Senate take note of the report.

It is with great pleasure that I present this report to the chamber. This has been a very important inquiry. We have learnt a lot, as anybody reading the committee's report and looking at the submissions will note. We have travelled extensively around Australia to various states. We have heard from individuals, from organisations working with those with a hearing impairment and taken a lot of evidence. We have made a large number of recommendations because it is a vital issue and one that touches in some way every Australian. Currently, one in six Australians has a hearing impairment and that is predicted to rise to one in four Australians. Of course, it is not just those with a hearing impairment who are affected; it is their families and friends and the productivity of Australia. Hearing impairment costs us billions of dollars. As I said, it touches families, friends and employers, so it affects everybody. There are some key issues. I should say straightaway that there is a very strong acknowledgment of the programs that we already have in Australia, particularly by Australian Hearing Services and the fantastic work they do with those between birth and the age of 21. And there are other services for the over-65s who are very strongly supported.

Access to services for those between the ages of 21 and 65 was the biggest issue that was raised with us. Until the age of 21 people get very strong support and they get access to hearing aids and assessments. But, when they get to 21, that is it—there is no more support. Take for example students at university who are doing their courses and their hearing aids no longer work.

Hearing aids can cost between \$3,000 and \$10,000. If you are a university student, you cannot find \$3,000 to \$10,000. We heard of personal accounts where people said that they had to drop out of university because they were not able to hear. So it has affected their education—and, of course, then it affects their ability to be employed. We also heard a lot of evidence of people retiring early because they felt excluded from the workforce. They were no longer able to cope in the workforce with a hearing impairment.

We have made a number of recommendations that deal with access to services. We have said that we believe that those over 21, for a start, should still be able to gain access to Hearing Services Australia on a means tested basis. Obviously if you are in a position where you can afford those services, it would be on a fee-for-service basis. But, if you cannot, we believe it should be means tested. We also believe that people should have access to services on a means tested basis—so the same sort of process that applies for access to the voucher system et cetera. Those over 21 should have access to these services on a means tested approach. There is no doubt in our minds that those between the ages of 21 and 65 are disadvantaged by not being able to get access to hearing services.

We have also made a number of recommendations around education, awareness and research. We need to, for a start, increase awareness of hearing impairment in Australia. We need to increase the awareness of employers. We need to increase access for people to gain support in the workforce. I know a lot of members will be aware that I am very strongly supportive of the need to address hearing in Aboriginal communities. Hearing in Aboriginal communities is a very significant issue. We spent a lot of time looking at the research in this area. In some communities, up to 40 per cent of people are affected by otitis media, which then affects their hearing. A four per cent level of this disease internationally is considered a pandemic and a serious health risk. In some communities, as I said, 40 per cent of people are affected by otitis media. Particularly if they are babies, they have reoccurring bouts of this and, by the time they get to school, their hearing has been significantly affected. That then alienates them from school. If you are going to school and English is not your first language and your hearing is impaired, you are in big trouble from the word go in terms of being able to access literacy and numeracy

programs. That can increasingly alienate you from education.

We looked at the number of Aboriginal people with a hearing impairment who are in correctional institutions and the criminal justice system. We were presented with evidence from the Northern Territory, where there was a study done in, I think, 2007—but it might have been a bit earlier. That study showed that 90 per cent of Aboriginal people in the Darwin correctional centre had a hearing impairment—90 per cent. Other states actually do not know what number of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system have a hearing impairment. New South Wales said that it had done a study that indicated it was very high there too. So we have made a number of recommendations looking at access to hearing services and dealing with this issue in Aboriginal communities. It is absolutely fundamental.

One of the key points that was raised with us was that Hearing Services Australia can provide hearing aids to people up to the age of 21 and they can provide hearing aids to Aboriginal children but, unfortunately, hearing aids for Aboriginal children, particularly if you are in a remote community, get lost, get damaged and get grit in them because they are in sand and sometimes there is a bit of shame about wearing them. But what has been identified as extremely successful for Aboriginal children is sound fields and dealing with acoustics in the classroom. Unfortunately, under the legislation, Hearing Services Australia cannot provide those services. Even though it is cheaper and more effective to provide sound fields in classrooms, they are unable to fund that because of the legislation. So we have made recommendations that that be reviewed and that those services be provided to schools.

We found that there was no overall audit of the number of classrooms in the Northern Territory that have sound fields. I suppose one of the immediate results of this inquiry was that, coincidentally, on the day the inquiry was in Darwin and I was asking questions around sound fields, the education department announced that it was going to be undertaking an audit of the number of classrooms in the Northern Territory. I would say that that was an immediately good outcome from our inquiry.

We have made a large number of recommendations. We tried to trim them, but this issue is so important to this country, particularly when you consider the ageing population and that we are going to go from one in six to one in four Australians who have a hearing impairment. This affects people's physical and mental health, their ability to participate in community, their employability and, basically, their life outcomes. It is absolutely essential that we build on the good work that we do in Australia. This report is not about what a bad job we do in Australia on hearing services and helping

the hearing impaired; it is about building on the good work that we do. We cannot rest on our laurels.

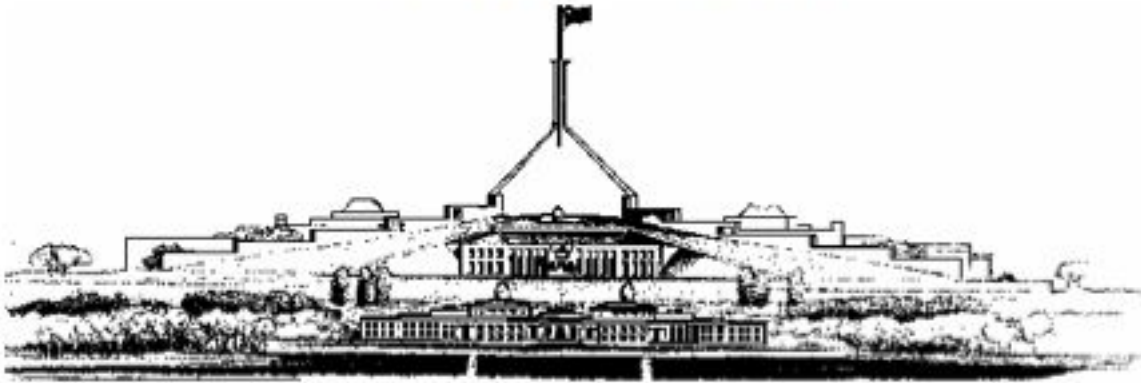
We need to inject more resources into some key areas—in particular, into helping those people between the ages of 21 and 65. We need to enable them to access services. We need to train people. One of the recommendations is about ensuring people can get trained in audiology. There are also some perverse incentives in the system at the moment. Those over 65 can automatically get access to the voucher system. The government has introduced some measures around eligibility. But a lot of people feel that those over 65 who—after being told by, for example, their families that they think they have some hearing issues—go and get tested and get hearing aids then put those hearing aids in the drawer. At least a quarter of those end up getting put in the drawer. Those people are not getting the assistance that their hearing aids could provide them. So we need to provide more support to older people about accessing hearing services.

I know some of my colleagues want to talk about this. This was a unanimous report. I urge people to read it and I particularly urge government to take on board our recommendations. I thank the secretariat for all their support—they have been fantastic—and I thank my colleagues and all those marvellous organisations. *(Time expired)*



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

COMMITTEES

Community Affairs References Committee

Report

SPEECH

Thursday, 13 May 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 13 May 2010
Page 3
Questioner
Speaker Moore, Sen Claire

Source Senate
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Senator MOORE (Queensland) (11.07 am)—Four years ago, Mr Peter Lindley and his wife Jill came to visit me in my office to talk about the urgent need to have an inquiry into hearing in our country. He had a severe hearing impairment himself, having had industrial hearing loss over many years. He came to talk about why it is so important for us as a government to look into the issue of hearing loss across our community, focusing on the need for access, support and, most importantly, looking at what the dangers are to the hearing health of our country into the future.

It has taken a long time but now we have been able to have a formal hearing into hearing—which we laughed about on the committee many times as we actually put those terms together. Nonetheless, we have now come forward with a report which has a large number of recommendations. It strongly vindicates the urgent need that there was for this issue to be considered by our government.

As Senator Siewert has said, there were no complaints about the quality of service for those who are able to access the service in our country, and there were significant amounts of praise given both for the people who worked in the Australian hearing services and for the amazing wealth of intellectual and professional knowledge we have in the areas of research in this country. Again, as so often happens, when you actually have the time to see what is available in this country it gives us great pride. Internationally, the work of the researchers and the work of the people in this industry are renowned across the whole world—and should be, most particularly by the people who live in this country.

We will not have time, in the very short time we have got to speak this morning, to talk about the range of important things that came out of this inquiry. I do want to put on record, though, some of the evidence that we received about the mental health aspects of people who have hearing issues in our country—such as the feeling of isolation, the feeling of not being engaged in the community and the way that people can have enormous problems in fitting in and being accepted. Those things were told to us with great difficulty by many people who chose to come and talk with us about their private pain. It was not only from those who actually had hearing loss but also from their parents, their friends and the community around them.

When we see that people have been damaged by the fact that they do not feel accepted by those around them, when their opportunities for employment and education and their opportunities to make effective choices about their future are all affected by something that so many of us take for granted—the ability to hear and communicate effectively with those around us—we as a wider Australian community must accept these issues. We must look at a way we can address them and then we can effectively say that we are working well with all those in our community.

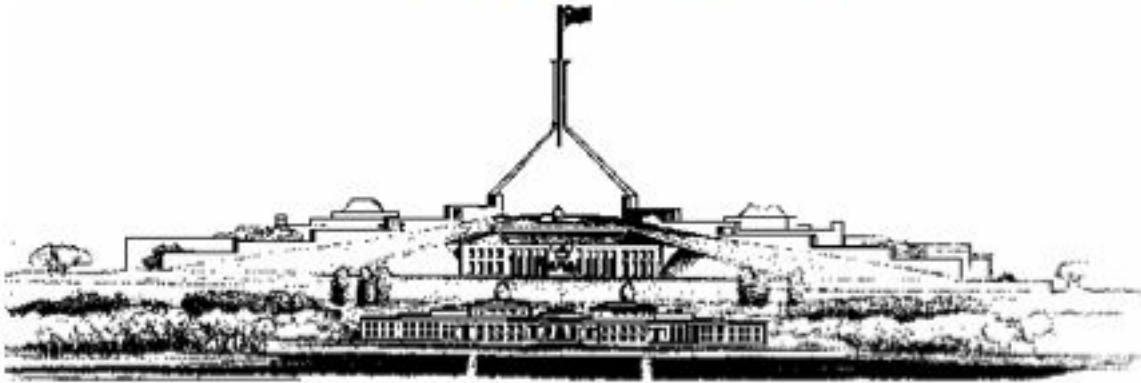
As we talk further over many years, I believe some of these recommendations will be before us as we make decisions about how we best respond. There is the whole aspect of improving access to services. Most particularly, we heard from those people who were over 21 who had been receiving amazingly strong support—the best in the world. We were told on a number of occasions that the support that young people in this country have up to the age of 21 is unparalleled anywhere in the world; but the way that the system works now, and has for many years—this is not a new issue—is one that needs to be firmly on the agenda into the future. The access to services for people over 21 needs to be something that we consider; it cannot be just a personal responsibility. The costs are enormous. It was a huge surprise to me to see the large costs of getting hearing services and that is something no family can handle by themselves.

I could go on for a long time about the issues in schools and education, but I do know that Senator Adams wants to make a contribution in this area. I want to put on record my appreciation to the secretariat and my appreciation for so many people who gave their time to tell us their stories—again reinforcing the value of the committee system in this place. We now have those issues in front of us. We cannot run away from them. I had practised my Auslan to say, ‘Thank you, we hear you in this place’. I do not think it would actually work effectively in *Hansard* but I can assure you that many of us now have a greater appreciation of the need to widen our language services. Mr Lindley, we finally came through.



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

COMMITTEES

Community Affairs References Committee

Report

SPEECH

Thursday, 13 May 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 13 May 2010
Page 3
Questioner
Speaker Adams, Sen Judith

Source Senate
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Senator ADAMS (Western Australia) (11.12 am)—I also rise to speak on our Senate Community Affairs References Committee report, *Hear us: inquiry into hearing health in Australia*. When we started this inquiry I wondered how it was going to turn out, but it was absolutely incredible how the public embraced it. I would like to thank all those who contributed to our inquiry. We had an enormous number of submissions and the further we went the more we learnt as a committee.

I would like to focus on the issue of Indigenous people. Otitis media is a very common problem amongst Indigenous communities. It just goes to show, with the evidence that we heard later on, that 90 per cent of all incarcerated Indigenous people have some sort of hearing loss. Think about this: a child with otitis media that has not been able to be rectified has to somehow be educated. But because the child cannot hear and cannot communicate with its parents or peers, it moves through society being a little different and probably rejected in the community. I think that through the inquiry we have come up with something that really and truly must be worked on very hard.

As those children grow up, if they are rejected, they become loners. They are not educated because they cannot hear, and they become frustrated. They, unfortunately, often end up in the justice system. It is much easier for them when they do not understand to nod and say yes. I do wonder just how many of them end up with the wrong sentencing and move backwards and forwards through the justice system. That to me is one of the most important issues that we have to deal with. Somehow we have to ensure that those children, when they are babies, can be treated properly and then they can be educated.

We found a great example at Hermannsburg. There are a large number of children at the school with some type of hearing loss. The school there is very proactive with children with hearing loss. They have acoustic classrooms with hearing loops. The teachers use lapel microphones. Those children are really doing very, very well. Several months ago there was a photo of the principal of the school with a number of students on the front page of the *Australian* to show what can be done in a remote Indigenous community as far as education goes. A lot of that was to do with the fact that those children had the ability to hear what the teachers were

saying and so the teachers were able to communicate with the children.

Once again, the solutions lie in being tested as a baby to pick up any problems associated with hearing and sorting out any behavioural problems which may develop and mentoring these children through their education. I know that time is limited, so I would like to thank the secretariat. They have been very good in travelling with us, coping with all the issues we had to cope with and with the large number of submissions that we had. I would like to commend the report to the Senate and I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.