

# LET US HEAR

Campaign Committee of Deafness Council NSW Inc for Equity &  
Continued Access to Services of Australian Hearing for Deaf Adults

## **SUBMISSION to HON JUSTINE ELLIOT Minister for Ageing and Hearing Services**

### **CONTINUED ACCESS TO HEARING HEALTH SERVICES AFTER AGE 21 FOR FORMER CHILD CLIENTS OF AUSTRALIAN HEARING**

Earlier this year, HREOC adopted, as its new corporate commission, **human rights – everyone, everywhere everyday**. Deafness has a huge impact on the everyday lives of people with this disability.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Let Us Hear is an Australia-wide organisation representing deaf people between the ages of 21 and 65 years, former child clients of Australian Hearing (AH).

It was started in 1997 by parents who realised the need of many hearing impaired and deaf young adults who were unable to access affordable hearing aids and services in the private sectors. Since then we have advocated for equity and continued access for the services of AH.

From diagnosis, usually soon after birth, hearing aids or cochlear implants are fitted, and these babies immediately commence intensive training to learn language, lip-reading and auditory skills. When they start school they are frequently integrated into mainstream classes with the support of a Visiting Teacher of the Deaf. During this time these children are given every educational advantage and supported by the expert audiologists at AH until they are 21. When these services are taken away, many are still completing tertiary courses or establishing themselves in the workplace. Losing these services not only cripples their ability to complete their courses or maintain employment but also has a devastating impact on their emotional, social and psychological wellbeing and takes away their capacity to function in the way they have been used to in the hearing world.

It is widely acknowledged that there are significant hearing problems amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders due to chronic Otitis-Media. Although these problems continue on over the age of 21, they also get no Government assistance. We include this group in this submission.

## **PROBLEMS FOR PEOPLE WITHOUT ACCESS TO HEARING AIDS**

- Huge difficulty faced when having to find an audiologist in the private sector who is expert in the complexities of fitting aids to the pre-lingually deaf. Most of these audiologists are only experienced with treating the acquired deaf who generally have only a mild to moderate hearing loss.
- There are a large number of audiometrists working in the private sector who do not have the two year university qualification of audiologists. There are many examples of uninformed young deaf people who have wasted a lot of money in search of the appropriate professional who can give them the correct advice.
- The private hearing aid industry is not licensed and works on a commission basis. This is a concern when they are dealing with vulnerable deaf people who have little confidence in stating their needs.
- The high cost of commercial aids and services prevent many people from being able to continue wearing them. The costs of hearing aids are not tax deductible and there are no schemes to assist with the purchase, repairs or any other costs e.g. fitting of moulds, batteries etc.
- People with severe or profound losses hear nothing without aids, and consequently the quality of their speech deteriorates when they can no longer monitor their own voices.
- Residual hearing quickly deteriorates without the stimulation of hearing devices.
- Lip-reading is far more difficult without the amplification of the hearing device.
- Many find that without the benefit of a hearing device they need to turn to sign language to communicate.
- Relationships with family and community are difficult to maintain and this causes isolation, social disadvantage and mental health problems.
- Employment complications which have a negative affect on productivity.
- Second-hand hearing aids can be supplied by hearing aid banks. This is not a satisfactory solution because hearing aids need to be individually fitted and mapped to each individual hearing loss, and often second-hand hearing aids are not the correct match to the hearing loss of the person.
- Deaf students have been known to share hearing aids in order to attend lectures and some students have been forced to drop out of their courses.
- Some deaf people when they turned 21 were so frightened of losing the services of AH they applied for the Disability Pension as neither they nor their parents could afford to buy commercial hearing aids.
- One of our members, who currently wears hearing aids, plays with Deaf Golf Australia and is amongst the 10 women who have been chosen to represent Australia in the World Deaf Golf Championship. She reports that she is the only one of these golfers who still wears an aid.

## **COSTS TO THE INDIVIDUAL**

- **Hearing aids** - from \$2,500 to in excess of \$5,000 each and usually 2 are required.
- **Ear moulds** - \$75 - \$150 for each mould. Some people have had to pay for badly fitting moulds and then they are charged again for replacements.
- **Hearing aid batteries** - \$9 for a pack of 6 which lasts for approximately 2 weeks for the wearer of a digital aid. However a packet of batteries will only last 1 week with certain aids.
- **Repairs** - minor repairs \$35 and major repairs can be several hundred dollars.
- **Cochlear implants** - minor repairs flat rate \$396. Major repair requires an upgrade of processor which costs \$8000. This can be claimed through the private health fund. Two thirds of adult implantees are not privately insured.
- **Cochlear implant batteries** - each processor requires 3 heavy duty batteries which last for 2 days. These cost \$60 a month.

There is no financial help from Medicare benefits and there is very little help from private cover, that is, if the individual can afford private medical insurance. The hearing aid companies expect the hearing aids to be bought outright and there are no credit facilities. There are no tax rebates.

## **UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

We are pleased to learn of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities advocating measures to:

- ensure the rights of people who are deaf are respected and promoted;
- ensure policies, programs and services;
- take into account consideration of their needs, promote their rights to education, employment, and participation in all aspects of community and political life;
- ensure emergency and safety planning;
- take into consideration their needs and take measures to eliminate discrimination on the basis of disability.

It also includes affordable access to devices and assistive technologies (Article 20). These are the issues for which Let Us Hear has been advocating since 1997.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Option 1**

That the Australian Government allow all former child clients of AH over the age of 21 be included on the Eligibility List of AH. We understand that this could be through the voucher scheme.

## Option 2

That the Australian Government allow for all former child clients of AH over the age of 21 be permitted to continue to be serviced on an affordable co-payment basis with appropriate subsidies for low income earners.

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## SUPPORTING STATEMENTS

**Julia Gillard** at ACOSS National Annual Conference on 22 November 2007 said “As the ANZ’s Saul Eslake and the Business Council of Australia’s Michael Chaney have recently told us: reducing disadvantage is now both a moral and economic imperative for Australia.

Labor strongly agrees. Unlike the Howard government, we believe that fairness and prosperity are utterly inseparable. And that turning our backs on the disadvantaged will come at a serious cost to our economic future.”

**Bill Shorten** at the 5<sup>th</sup> National Deafness Sector Summit on 24<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> May 2008 said “What the role of myself and Government should be is to enable people to be empowered so you can work out and people can work out how to live their lives full of quality and meaning, and enjoy that for the rest of your life”

**Barry MacKinnon** Chairman of The Hearing Services Consultative Committee said at the 5<sup>th</sup> National Deafness Sector Summit on 24<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> May 2008 “You have heard Jo Quayle talk about it today. She’s on the Committee, about the cost of hearing aids or services to people over the age of 21, particularly low income earners. We made those recommendations, we talked about that and will continue to do so.”

**Jo Quayle** Board Member of Deafness Forum said at the 5<sup>th</sup> National Deafness Sector Summit on 24<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> May 2008 “Productivity and social inclusion for young deaf and hearing impaired people can’t happen if they can’t afford to replace or repair their hearing aids”

**In the Labor party’s election policy 2007** “An Australian Social Inclusion Agenda” it has enunciated the deep concerns that we have fought for in the past 11 years.

“Labor believes that to be socially included, all Australians need to be able to play a full role in Australian life, in economic, social, psychological and political terms. To be socially included all Australians must be given the opportunity to:

- Secure a job
- Access services
- Connect with others in life through family, friends, work, personal interests and local community
- Deal with personal crisis such as ill health, bereavement or the loss of a job
- Have their voice heard

None of this can be achieved without the continued affordable audiological help of hearing devices.