

Minister Butler, MP's and Senators, Ladies and Gentlemen.

On behalf of HCIA.....welcome.

Thank you for giving up your valuable time to join us for this breakfast as part of Hearing Awareness Week.

I am John Pappalardo the chair of HCIA. HCIA is a relatively new organisation – we came together only five years ago. We represent the companies that together fit around 60% of the hearing devices used in Australia.

Australia has a hearing services program about which members of parliament from all sides of politics can feel justifiably proud. It started under the Chifley Labor Government in 1947 and was dramatically expanded by the Howard Government in 1997. Today, the services that Australians with a hearing disability can access, are the envy of many around the world.

Last year, nearly 620,000 Australians accessed this program in some form or another – or to put it in terms more relevant to MPs, around 4,100 people in each and every federal electorate can be expected to access this program every year.

This is a vast change from just 15 years ago, when the program was run with a single provider in a limited number of locations. In fact the industry today is unrecognisable from what existed when the program was opened up in 1997.

The issue of hearing impairment in Australia suffers from the fact that people do not see it as life threatening.

While that may be the case, hearing loss is far from trivial, whether for the individual, their family or the wider economy. In 2006 Access Economics undertook research into hearing loss in Australia. Their findings may surprise you. Of the more than 3 and a half million Australians with hearing loss, nearly half were of working age i.e. 16 to 64 years of age. If you are between 45 and 65 years of age and you have hearing loss, your chance of being employed is 20% lower if you are a man, and 16% lower if you are a woman. The DIRECT financial cost of hearing loss for the Australian economy was calculated to be \$11.75 billion, the largest component of this being lost productivity. We can always argue about the numbers but the fact remains, they are significant!

So hearing loss is not just a major health issue, but a major issue of productivity, a major issue of social isolation and a major issue of fairness and social justice.

As a country and as an industry, we do provide an excellent service and excellent care, provided you are either too young or too old to work. However, this leaves many people with a hearing impairment and who are of working age without access to technologies that would enable them to remain as productive and engaged members of society. Hearing Impaired adults on low incomes who are not eligible for the commonwealth hearing services program are usually unable to afford hearing aids or other hearing health services.

We commend Minister Butler and the Government for recently extending the eligibility of the hearing services program to those 21 to 26 years of age.

We do understand that in tight financial times, this is a real challenge. Without wishing in any way to detract from this substantial achievement, we would like to suggest three areas where we see opportunity for any political party looking for policy ideas.....

And they don't all cost money.....

One involves expenditure, one involves savings, and the final suggestion is at no cost.

First, the expenditure.

Surely if we are interested in productivity, social inclusion and social fairness – then there is nothing fair about low income Australians who are of working age being unable to access hearing technology when as a society we provide this already to the young and the elderly. If the cost is too great, any expansion could be means tested and otherwise staged in its introduction. For example, those on low incomes and between 45 and 64 years of age have the greatest problem and we can start with them.

Secondly, the savings.

When regulation of this industry was conceived in 1997, the industry was vastly different from what you have today. Today there is an environment of companies operating under the corporations act with internal auditing, external auditing and quality controls. As an organisation, HCIA has put considerable effort into a process of voluntary accreditation. In addition, professional bodies like the Audiological Society of Australia have sound qualification and recognition procedures and continuous professional development in place. Our system of regulation is minutely detailed and proscriptive, down to the point of second guessing practice methods of professionals. It might have been arguable in 1997, it is not in 2012.

Finally, something that costs you nothing.

It was stated in 1997, that the reason to preserve Australian Hearing in Government hands was that it had considerable expertise in treating children with a hearing impairment. We agree and think they do an outstanding job. The particular reason why they do such a good job is that as an organisation they are focussed. We think it would be an enormous pity to risk losing this focus and to risk scare taxpayers dollars by having, as is rumoured, a government agency competing in this area that is already subject to substantial competition.

So thank you once again for coming and thank you for your commitment to Hearing Awareness Week.

I hope you enjoy your breakfast.