

The facts about Hearing Health in Australia

One in six Australians suffer from some degree of hearing loss. By 2050, this will increase to one in four.

Although the forecast increased prevalence of hearing loss is largely driven by our ageing population – over one third of all people with hearing loss acquire their hearing impairment through preventable means.

The ability to communicate, to speak and listen to others is fundamental to participation in work, education, social activities and the community at large. A loss of hearing fundamentally changes the ability of a person to communicate and thus limits the way they are able to interact with society. This can lead to isolation and have profound social and economic consequences for both the individual and society.

Hearing health is a mainstream health issue which touches the lives of many Australians – however as a public health issue, it is not ranked as a national health priority.

Australia is one of the better providers of reimbursed hearing services to its elderly population and the program offered by the Department of Health and Ageing has expanded substantially over the last decade. However, in relation to hearing healthcare, Australia is not world's best practice.

The average age of people accessing hearing services under the Commonwealth Government scheme is 79 years, yet half the people with hearing loss are under the age of 65 years of age.

Only one in four people who could benefit from a hearing aid have one and there is an average of seven years between a person needing help with hearing and actually seeking help.

We all know that hearing loss interferes with a person's ability to lead a healthy and productive life and any health issue that places limitations on productivity and healthy ageing must be of concern to government and to the community at large.

HCIA believes that if Australia were to move to world's best practice, it should examine uncoupling access to hearing services and the pension age so that hearing impaired Australians could access hearing services at a time when they are highly motivated to do so and thus remain as productive as they can be, for as long as they can.

Hearing is a critical sense for effective communication in the workplace. Most employment situations require verbal communication in order to effectively engage with co-workers or the public and effective hearing is critical to ensure safety on the job.

Without hearing rehabilitation, hearing impaired Australians can be expected to suffer losses in remuneration due to underemployment; may make mistakes on the job; experience higher rates of unemployment and in general, experience an overall reduction in quality of life which may also impact negatively on job performance.

Funding for hearing services is fragmented between the Commonwealth and State agencies and between the public and private sectors. There is no coordinated overall hearing healthcare program across Australia, despite the fact that hearing health affects millions of Australians.

Hearing loss
costs Australia
\$11.75BN
annually in lost
productivity and
other impacts*

The Federal Government Program

In 1947 the Australian Hearing Services Program was established by the then Federal Labor Government in response to the high rate of hearing loss in returning World War Two veterans.

In 1996, the Federal Coalition announced the introduction of a voucher system for hearing services and greater private sector involvement in the provision of Government funded services.

The Commonwealth Hearing Services Program provides hearing assessment along with hearing aid provision and maintenance to eligible Australians. In 2008 – 2009 the total program expenditure was \$309m. This included the Voucher Program; the Community Service Obligation and the Hearing Loss Prevention Program. Services are delivered under the Program by individuals, partnerships, companies or government agencies who are accredited by the Minister for Health and Ageing and contracted with the Office of Hearing Services to provide hearing rehabilitation to eligible clients. The requirement for the Department to provide this oversight stemmed historically from the fact that the hearing industry is unregulated with no licensing or registration at the State or Territory level. The various industry and professional bodies are now in agreement that self-regulation is ideal and in an effort to address this, HCIA has made a considerable investment in developing its own accreditation standards and code of conduct for its clinics around the country. The professional bodies are also moving to accreditation of practitioners.



Hearing health should become a national health priority.

Gaps in the Federal Government Program

There is no doubt that the Commonwealth Hearing Services Program is an outstanding program that provides a world class service to eligible clients; young people under the age of 26 or adults on an age, disability or veteran's pension.

However, this leaves many people who have a hearing impairment and are of working age, without any funding or access to services and technologies that will enable them to communicate and stay in the workforce.

Hearing impaired adults on low incomes who are not eligible for the Commonwealth's Hearing Services Program are usually unable to afford the often costly hearing health services or hearing aids. This is due to a combination of factors such as the exclusion of audiological services from rebates under Medicare (unlike a similar sensory impairment in vision impairment); limited rebates from Private Health Insurers, the cost of the aid, and the cost of the fitting and ongoing rehabilitation.

Hearing impaired adults unable to afford hearing health services can suffer severely disadvantaged lives. Their ability to participate in training or employment can be limited, and their family and social life can be severely disrupted. This places them at high risk of developing health and interpersonal problems arising from communication difficulties and social isolation.

This needs to change.

Hearing health should become a national health priority.

The Impact of Hearing Loss in Australia on Australian Workers

A report published by Access Economics in 2006 found the following;

- In 2005, over 3.55m Australians suffered from hearing loss and nearly half of them were of working age (16-64 years).
- Employment rates for hearing impaired people between the ages of 45 and 65 are lower than for comparable people in the rest of the population (20.5% lower for men and 16.5% lower for women).
- The real financial cost of hearing loss was \$11.75b (or 1.4% of GDP) – the largest component of this being productivity loss (\$6.7b).
- The total economic cost of hearing loss per annum is \$23b.
- \$62 per person is spent for hearing loss per annum as compared with \$10,904 per person with cancer or \$42,064 per person with mental illness.

HCIA believes that the Government needs to focus on employment outcomes for people aged between 45 and 65 who suffer from hearing loss. These people have substantially lower participation in the workforce – i.e. more than half of them are not in paid work, compared to less than a third of those without hearing loss.

This would strongly suggest that hearing impairment has a very substantial and unrecognised effect on workforce productivity.

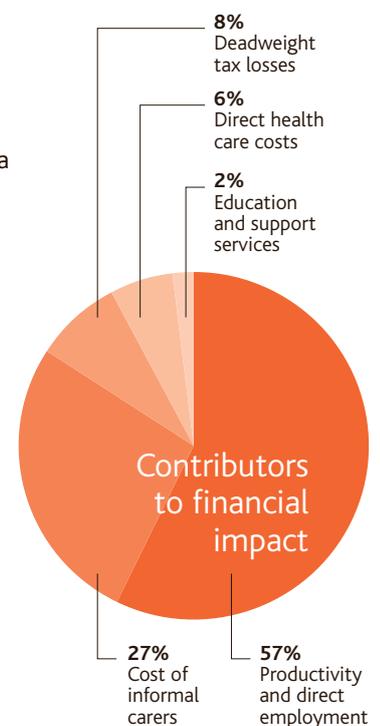
About the Hearing Care Industry Association

The Hearing Care Industry Association (HCIA) was incorporated as a Company Limited by Guarantee in March 2007. It was formed to raise the profile of hearing related issues in Australia and better inform policy development.

Between them, HCIA member companies care for many thousands of Australians from more than 440 locations across the country. They lead teams of clinicians and client service officers to provide Australians with excellence in hearing care. The clinicians are industry trained and Government accredited specialists in hearing care, and they work with the latest hearing technology. They employ more than 500 professionals between them. Many of them form part of international groups which deliver hearing services to clients in many countries outside Australia.

HCIA members are accredited and contracted by the Office of Hearing Services to deliver hearing services through its voucher program, and to provide hearing health to private patients.

Chart at right: Listen HEAR! 2006, a report by Access Economics and CRC HEAR



HCIA Member Organisations

National Hearing Care

www.nhc.com.au

National Hearing Care (NHC) is Australia's leading independent provider of hearing healthcare services with more than 115 permanently staffed clinics throughout Australia. NHC invests heavily in hearing care across Australia in a number of ways: through expanding its reach and client access, such that today over 35% of NHC's locations are based in regional areas; through the training and development of audiology students, operating the largest clinical placement program in the country. NHC is part of the Amplifon Group who is represented in 19 countries.

HearingLife

www.hearinglife.com.au

HearingLife has provided hearing care services to Australians for over 70 years. It has become one of Australia's largest private networks of hearing centres, with over 160 sites across Australia and has expanded into the USA. Hearing Life is a network of 50 national retail hearing clinics with an additional 125 associated visiting sites. HearingLife continues to build on its past reputation through professional services, its range of quality hearing solutions and its commitment to helping clients make informed choices about their hearing. In addition to its professional services, HearingLife maintains excellent relationships with Australian Universities, through the provision of teaching services in the field of Audiology.

Connect Hearing

www.connecthearing.com.au

Connect Hearing's focus is on innovation in the actual hearing solution, and the delivery of care and in customer service. Connect Hearing was the first, and remains the only, national Australian provider of the revolutionary, new 'set and forget' Lyric™ hearing aid – the world's first and only fully invisible, soft, extended wear hearing aid. Since the Connect Hearing brand was developed and launched in Sydney in 2008, it has spread to a number of other countries including USA, Canada and Belgium. Connect Hearing is part of the global Sonova Group, which sponsors the Hear The World Foundation.

Audioclinic

www.audioclinic.com.au

AudioClinic is one of the leading providers of quality hearing healthcare with an extensive clinic network in over 230 locations nationally and is part of the global hearing healthcare organisations, William Demant Group. Over the past 45 years its professional and caring team of experts have restored the joys of hearing to over 100,000 Australians. AudioClinic is committed to improving people's lives and believes in continuous care and support, offering free hearing tests through all its clinics, as a service to local communities across Australia.

Bay Audio

www.bayaudio.com.au

Launched in 2007, Bay Audio is one of Australia's leading providers of hearing devices. It has 35 permanent hearing locations located in Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria and more than 20 visiting sites. Bay Audio's success has been built on contemporary products across a diverse range of brands. Services that Bay Audio offers include diagnostic hearing tests, online hearing tests, hearing protection and advice, hearing loss treatment and hearing device consultations and evaluations. Bay Audio also offers advice on private and government funding for hearing loss related issues.

Neurosensory

www.nsu.com.au

Neurosensory was established over 35 years ago as ENT surgeons wanted to ensure that all clients have a guaranteed standard for testing in hearing care. Neurosensory is aligned with over 30 Ear Nose and Throat (ENT) surgeons across South East Queensland, who liaise closely with Neurosensory clinicians. At Neurosensory all testing procedures are thorough, to ensure accuracy in diagnosis as part of its commitment to supporting the medical community and delivering the best clinical outcomes for its clients. Neurosensory also offers an extensive range of hearing solutions, including hearing aids, Cochlear and Baha implants, and tinnitus treatments and hearing protection.

Exposure to
excessive noise
costs business
\$1,880
per employee
each year*

Hearing Care
Industry Association
Level 7, 167 Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000
T | +61 2 9944 3250
mail@hcia.com.au
www.hcia.com.au

HCIA

* Listen HEAR! 2006, a report by Access Economics and CRC HEAR