

Hearing Awareness Week 2011

Official Launch by The Hon Mark Butler MP, Minister for Mental Health and Ageing, 22 August 2011

Speech Notes for Donna Staunton, CEO, HCIA

Minister Butler,

Thank-you very much for launching hearing awareness week.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank-you for joining us this morning. I am Donna Staunton, the CEO of the Hearing Care Industry association. My members are made up of diverse range of Companies who provide hearing Care at more than 440 different locations around Australia. They lead teams of clinicians to provide Australians with excellence in hearing care.

The Australian Government makes a very substantial investment in providing assistance to elderly Australians with hearing impairment. Last year 500,000 Australians accessed this program.

It was the Federal ALP that first provided a Hearing Services Program, when in 1947, alarmed at the high incidence of hearing loss amongst returned servicemen; the Commonwealth commenced federally funded assistance. The Federal Liberal Party very substantially expanded the scheme in 1996, when a competitive market in service provision was established.

It is fair to say, that if you are an aged or disability pensioner, a veteran or under the age of 26 years, in Australia you can access an excellent program. The expo that is taking place in Parliament house over the next two days will highlight the range of services and technology available to Australian with hearing impairment.

However, I would like to use the opportunity of Hearing Awareness Week, to not just congratulate you on the past, as both sides of politics can take rightful pride in past achievements in this area, but to issue a challenge for the future.

Hearing impairment suffers from the fact that people do not see it as 'life threatening'. While that may be the case, it is far from trivial, both for the individual and their family and for the Australian economy.

In 2006, Access economics produced a report on Hearing loss in Australia. Their findings may surprise you.

1. Of the more than 3 ½ million Australians with hearing loss (and that is about two and a half thousand people for each Federal electorate), nearly half were of working age, that is 16 to 64 years,

2. If you are between 45 and 65 years of age and have hearing loss, your chance of being employed are 20% lower if you are a man and 16% lower if you are women,
3. The DIRECT financial cost of hearing loss was calculated to be \$11.5 billion, the largest component of this being productivity loss.

So hearing loss is a major issue of productivity; a major issue of Fairness and a major issue of Social Justice.

We do provide excellent service and excellent care as a Country and as an industry, if you are either too young or too old to be in the workforce. However, this leaves many people who have a hearing impairment and who are of working age, without any funding or access to technologies that will enable them to communicate and stay in the workforce.

Hearing impaired adults who are on low incomes and who are not eligible for the Commonwealth's Hearing Services Program are usually unable to afford often costly hearing health services or hearing aids. This is due to a combination of factors, such as the exclusion of Audiological services from Medicare; limited rebates from Private Health insurers; the cost of the aid and the cost of fitting and ongoing maintenance.

Of course, we understand the budgetary challenges of difficult times. Not all needs to be done at once. Such a program could easily be targeted to those who are most financially disadvantaged or to those who are closest to retirement age. As a Country, if we are serious about lifting productivity and we are serious about keeping older workers in the workforce, then this is an issue that is crying out for attention.

As an industry, we congratulate Government on your commitment to date and the maintenance of the program in difficult times. We see the good that the Program does in the lives of our clients. But we also see those for whom such a program would be life changing, which is why we issue a challenge for the future.

If politics is about making a difference to the lives of ordinary Australians, here is a problem that only political vision can solve. As an industry, we will certainly be willing to assist however we can and we will be cheering from the sidelines.

Thank-you.