

Future Opportunities

True Australian stories*

A young man does not disclose his hearing disability until he is at a job interview because he believes he won't get a foot in the door if it's mentioned in his application.

An employment agency tells a graduate with a master's degree a job is available for him cleaning the aisles in a supermarket – that way he won't have to talk to people.

A registered nurse takes a demotion and withdraws from direct patient contact because she can't afford new hearing aids to manage the people in her care.

A parent has expensive private health insurance that covers her son's ankle operation and husband's knee operation, but it doesn't cover her hearing aids.

A man wonders why he can get a tax deduction to buy a laptop for work, but his other information processor – a hearing aid – doesn't qualify.

A mother preparing to return from maternity leave to her job as a teacher receives news that her baby is diagnosed as deaf. Mother and father agree she will have to resign and it will be five years of unpaid, uncompensated caring for her child before she can return to the workforce.

Every day, hearing-impaired Australians are being disadvantaged – they either cannot get employment or have difficulty keeping it.

*These real-life experiences were shared with us by David Brady, Chairman of the Deafness Forum.

About 2,500 people in each Federal electorate suffer from hearing loss

One in six Australians suffer from some degree of hearing loss (that is about 2,500 people for each Federal electorate) and nearly half are of working age, between 16 and 64 years. By 2050, this figure will increase to one in four. (*Access Economics, Listen Hear! The economic impact of hearing loss in Australia.*)

If you are between 45 and 65 and have hearing loss, your chances of being employed are 20% lower if you are a man and 16% lower if you are a woman.

The direct financial cost of hearing loss was estimated as \$11.5b in 2005, which represented 1.4% of Australia's then GDP. The largest element of this cost, over half, was lost wages and productivity among people with hearing loss (*Access Economics*). Thus the value of retaining or re-engaging people with hearing loss in the workforce is huge.

Hearing loss interferes with a person's ability to lead a healthy and productive life.

Any health issue that places limitations on productivity and healthy ageing must be of concern to government and the community. It certainly concerns HCIA and its members.

Assistance provided by the Federal Government

The Australian Government provides hearing services through the Office of Hearing Services (**OHS**). Support is available to eligible Australians under the Hearing Services (**Voucher**) Program and the Community Service Obligation (**CSO**) programs. The OHS programs enable access to complete hearing rehabilitation services including providing and maintaining hearing aids or assistive listening devices.

There is no doubt that the Commonwealth Hearing Services Program is an outstanding program that provides a world-class service to those eligible clients (young people under the age of 26 or adults on an age, disability or veteran's pension) but it simply does not go far enough. HCIA believes it should be expanded to those people who want to work or want to stay in work.

What is needed now

Hearing loss is a mainstream health issue that touches the lives of most Australians in one way or the other, yet as a public health issue it is not ranked as a national health priority. It should be.

In 2011 an advisory committee to the then Minister for Mental Health and Ageing recommended:

"Access to the program be extended to low-income Australians or working age (26-65 years) subject to a co-payment of \$100 to ensure any extension of the program be directed to the most highly motivated individuals, and

"That this access be means tested."

The **financial implications of expanding the program** were estimated by the advisory committee to be of the order of **\$46 million in a full year, with a \$100 copayment**. Given Department of Finance rules, these figures assume no offsetting savings. However, as *Access Economics* estimates the cost of hearing impairment is \$3,314 per person with hearing loss across the whole economy, expanding the program would mean on a per person basis a one-off payment of \$1,340 would generate an economy-wide benefit of \$3,314.

We understand that funding for new initiatives is tight. We encourage the Government to seriously consider cost-effective initiatives that would make a substantial difference to the lives of thousands of hearing-impaired Australians. Hearing loss is not a trivial issue. The nation's productivity would improve and pressures on services to address isolation, depression and anxiety for many Australians would be alleviated.

About the Hearing Care Industry Association (HCIA)

The Hearing Care Industry Association represents Australia's hearing healthcare retailers who, between them, care for thousands of hearing-impaired Australians in more than 440 locations around the country. Its members employ more than 500 professionals in teams of clinicians and client service officers to provide excellence in hearing care.

The clinicians are industry-trained and government-accredited specialists and they work with the latest technology. Many are members of international groups which deliver hearing services to clients around the world.

As an association, HCIA aims to provide a unified voice to all stakeholders about the needs of hearing-impaired Australians and this includes government, the bureaucracy, the media, professional bodies, and the public.

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