

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.

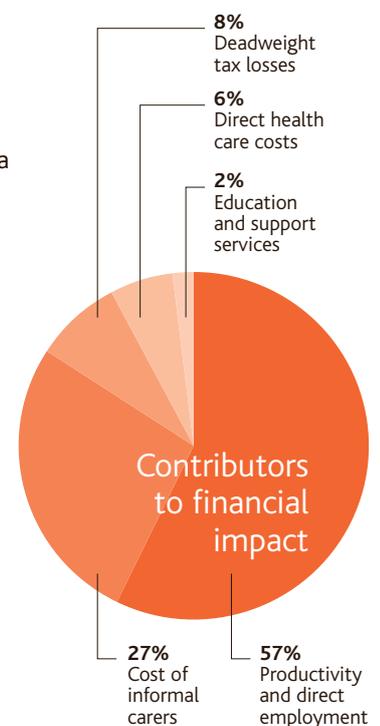
About the Hearing Care Industry Association

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

AudioClinic

AudioClinic is one of the leading providers of hearing care services for adults in Australia. With more than 200 locations nationally and 45 years of service, AudioClinic has helped tens of thousands of Australians overcome poor hearing and get back to enjoying life through improved communication. AudioClinic offers free hearing tests through all its clinics, as a service to local communities across Australia.

Bay Audio

In recent years Bay Audio has grown to become one of Australia's leading hearing health companies with 34 permanent sites and more than 20 visiting sites throughout New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. The growth of Bay Audio has been achieved through focussing first and foremost on customer's needs in addition to exceptional quality and offering a contemporary choice.

Connect Hearing

Connect Hearing is dedicated to helping Australians manage their hearing impairment through comprehensive hearing assessments and aftercare, innovative digital hearing instruments and other helpful listening devices, delivered via a national network of over 130 permanent and day clinics. In addition, Connect Hearing is the sole 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; allowing wearers to sleep, shower and exercise in their aids, and without the hassle of changing batteries.

HearingLife Australia

HearingLife was founded in Adelaide more than 70 years ago. It now has a network of clinics across Australia and has expanded into the USA. In addition to its professional services and range of top quality hearing solutions, HearingLife maintains excellent relationships with Australian Universities, through the provision of teaching services in the field of Audiology.

National Hearing Care

National Hearing Care (NHC) is Australia's leading independent provider of hearing healthcare services with more than 115 permanently staffed clinics throughout metropolitan and regional 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 and is the largest provider of hearing healthcare in the world.

The Neurosensory Unit

Founded in 1979 by ENT surgeon Dr Anthony Canty, the Neurosensory Unit is now owned and operated by 26 ENT surgeons, and was formerly known as Queensland Hearing Aids and Audiological Services. From small origins the Company has grown to employ over 50 people including 23 clinicians across 11 clinics in South East Queensland and Northern New South Wales. The Company offers a full range of services including hearing tests for newborns, treatment for tinnitus, diagnostic hearing tests, learning difficulty assessments, cochlear implant services and balance tests.

Widex Australia

Widex combines years of understanding with a natural curiosity in finding solutions to individual hearing loss. Widex has an uncompromising approach to innovation which has led to such advances as the world's first fully digital in-the-ear hearing aid, as well as their own revolutionary wireless technology. Widex is committed to finding not just the right solutions but the most natural solutions to hearing loss. That is why they emphasise the importance of design, technology and the environment. Widex has a new environmentally-friendly headquarters, complete with solar cells and an on-site windmill, making them the first CO2 neutral hearing aid manufacturer.

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

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