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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.

HICIA 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.

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

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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.

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

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