

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH AND AGEING PORTFOLIO

Budget Estimates 2011-2012, 30/31 May 2011

Question: E11-373

OUTCOME 7: Hearing Services

Topic: HEARING SERVICES PROGRAM - BETTER TARGETED SERVICES

Written Question on Notice

Senator Fifield asked:

- a) What is the process for determining if a patient clinically requires a replacement of hearing aids, rather than an adjustment?
- b) What are the criteria for "clinical need"?
- c) To what extent must hearing loss deteriorate before someone is eligible to qualify for "clinical need"?
- d) What is the process for issuing a voucher to someone with an identified clinical need?

Answer:

- a) Once the client has made an appointment, the practitioner will provide a full hearing assessment, have discussions with the client to identify (i) clinical and/or medical indicators that warrant medical referral, (ii) factors that may influence the clinical decision made, which are described below in answer (b), and (iii) rehabilitation options. Based on these findings, adjustments and/or repairs to the hearing devices may occur depending on whether or not this is necessary, or whether the hearing aids can be adjusted to the range needed. Refitting with new hearing aids may be considered if adjustments do not meet the client's requirements
- b) Practitioners of the Government's Hearing Services Program (HSP) make clinical judgments about clients' clinical needs. The decision to refit or adjust hearing aids is made based on the following:
  - hearing test results (severity and configuration of impairment);
  - whether the client's hearing loss is above the Program's Minimum Hearing Loss Threshold of 23 decibels.
  - the nature and extent of communication and listening environments;
  - the motivation, attitude, communication goals, self-perceived need and self-perceived hearing impairment of clients;
  - the shape, size and health of ears;
  - physical coordination;
  - other impairments such as blindness, mental and physical ability to manage different device styles; and

- the functionality of the current hearing device(s) and how effective they are for clients in relation to the above factors.
- c) Change to hearing levels is only one factor that is considered in making a clinical decision about whether or not to refit. A person's hearing may not change at all yet a refit is needed (for example, the person may have had a significant change in health that prevents effective use of the current hearing aids), whereas hearing may deteriorate significantly but refit is not warranted (for example, if the current hearing aids' amplification can be increased to meet the new hearing levels). The extent of deterioration does not solely determine need for refit and there is no limit imposed on eligibility based on this.
- d) There are three different groups of clients that fit this category.

The first are those that are not existing clients. To come on to the Hearing Services Program (the Program), a person must meet one of the criteria to be eligible under the program. They must complete an application form, have it signed by their General Practitioner and lodge it with the Office of Hearing Services (the Office). Following receipt of a successful application, the applicant is sent a voucher by the Office which they can take to a hearing services provider of their choice. The provider will test the voucher client for free and if there is a clinical need, and the hearing loss is above the 23 decibels minimum hearing loss threshold, fit the person with free hearing aids, or 'top up' hearing aids if the client chooses. The client can also take out a maintenance agreement for which they make a small contribution (the bulk is covered under the voucher). This agreement covers batteries and service/repairs.

The second group is people who are already clients of the Program. Every two years existing clients of the Program are issued with a return voucher request form (RVRF). If the client feels they need to have their hearing reviewed, they can return the RVRF to the Office and a new voucher will be sent to them. They may take this voucher to a hearing services provider for further assessment. Services, and if necessary upgraded aids will be provided under the Program. A new maintenance agreement for batteries and repairs may also be arranged at this time.

The third group is people who are already clients of the program that believe they need to have their hearing reviewed before the two year anniversary of their last fitting. People in this category may present to a hearing services provider for assessment and if a clinical need for new hearing aids is established, the provider can apply to the Office for a new voucher for the client.