



SUBMISSION TO:

SENATE COMMUNITY LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

**Re: The Health Insurance Amendment
(Extended Medicare Safety Net) Bill 2014 Inquiry**

PREPARED BY:

SPEECH PATHOLOGY AUSTRALIA

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Introduction

Speech Pathology Australia (SPA) is the national peak body for speech pathologists in Australia, representing more than 6000 members. Speech pathologists are university educated allied health professionals with specific knowledge and expertise in all areas of speech, language, fluency, voice, social communication and swallowing. Speech pathologists work with infants, children, adolescents, adults and the elderly with communication and/or swallowing disorders in the public and private sectors, across health, education, disability, community, mental health, juvenile and custodial and aged care systems.

Speech Pathology Australia thanks the Senate Community Legislation Committee for the opportunity to provide input into the Health Insurance Amendment (Extended Medicare safety Net) Bill 2004 Inquiry.

Background

Difficulties in speech, language, fluency, voice, social communication and swallowing can occur in isolation or the patient may have difficulties in more than one area (for example a patient following a stroke may have speech, language, fluency and swallowing difficulties). These difficulties arise from a range of conditions and may be present from birth (e.g., cleft palate, Down Syndrome or Autism Spectrum Disorder), emerge during early childhood (e.g., stuttering, severe speech sound disorder or literacy learning difficulties), or during adult years (e.g., traumatic brain injury, stroke and head and neck cancers) or be present in the elderly (e.g., dementia, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease). Furthermore, many of the patients speech pathologists work with have complex and long-term health needs in addition to their communication and swallowing needs requiring frequent visits to general practitioners, specialists and other primary care providers.

Speech pathology patients often have no or restricted access, due to a long waiting period or limited number of sessions, to public speech pathology services. This is especially so for patients living in rural and remote locations and for patients of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse populations. As a result patients who can afford to (and who have access to) will pay for private speech pathology services. Many of these patients incur full out of pocket costs because they are ineligible for Medicare rebates or they do not have private health cover for speech pathology. Those who do have access to Medicare rebates find that these rebates are capped and only cover a small portion of their out of pocket costs. The total out of pocket costs for patients with complex ongoing speech pathology needs can equate to thousands of dollars per year for a number of years. It is these patients who will often meet the threshold for the Extended Medicare Safety Net. In many instances patients who do not have access to public speech pathology services go without speech pathology because they cannot afford private speech pathology fees.

Speech Pathology Australia's Position on the Health Insurance Amendment (Extended Medicare Safety Net) Bill 2004 Inquiry.

Speech Pathology Australia supports the government's intention to preserve the lower concessional threshold of the Extended Medicare Safety Net (EMSN). This will continue to provide much needed support for low income individuals and families.

Speech Pathology Australia does not support the government's intention to increase the general Extended Medicare Safety Net threshold to \$2000 from 1 January 2015. Many speech pathology patients have long term and complex speech pathology and other allied health or medical needs. These individuals and families incur large health related bills and will now have to pay even more before they are eligible for the EMSN. These costs are in addition to their already substantial out of pocket costs for non rebateable speech pathology (and often other allied health) services.

Speech Pathology Australia urges the government to improve access and equity to primary health care, including speech pathology, for all patients.

If Speech Pathology Australia can assist in any other way or provide any other information please contact National Office on 03 9642 4899 or contact Gail Mulcair, CEO, by emailing

