

Chapter 7

Conclusion

7.1 This inquiry into the prevalence and incidence of speech, language and swallowing disorders in Australia, and the availability of services to treat these disorders, has been important. It is the first time that a federal parliamentary committee has focussed on the issue of the availability and adequacy of speech pathology services in Australia. As such, it has allowed many people who suffer from these conditions, as well as their parents and carers, the opportunity to have their voice heard and considered by the Parliament. This process has been valuable in itself. This report should be read in conjunction with the accounts of these submitters who experience, and care for those with, these disorders on a daily basis. The committee again thanks these submitters for their insights and their contribution to this inquiry.

7.2 The committee is also grateful to Speech Pathology Australia (SPA) for its leadership and guidance throughout the inquiry process. SPA proposed this inquiry in 2011. Once referred in late 2013, SPA was instrumental in publicising the inquiry among its members, encouraging submissions from its members and suggesting options for the committee's site visits. SPA has also provided the committee with information and advice throughout this inquiry on matters of committee interest.

7.3 As chapter 3 observed, a notable feature of this inquiry was the lack of reliable data on the prevalence of speech and language disorders as a whole, but quite substantial data on the number of people affected by particular disorders. There is no official data on the prevalence of speech and language disorders in Australia. SPA offered an estimate of 1.1 million Australians that are affected by speech, language and swallowing disorders, adding that it this figure is an under-estimate. There is, however, some excellent research data on the incidence and prevalence of specific disorders in Australia, such as stuttering and aphasia.

The need for collaboration with key stakeholders

7.4 This report has made several recommendations aimed at identifying the dimensions of the demand and the supply of speech pathology services in Australia. Most of these recommendations are addressed to the federal Department of Health. To recap, the committee has recommended that the Department:

- consider the data that is currently available through Research Centres and academic studies, and the data that is necessary to identify the areas of current and prospective need for speech pathology services. It should then consider where there are gaps, the need and the benefit of filling these gaps and how this information could best be gathered (recommendation 1);
- assess the need, the practicality and the likely cost of gathering further data through the Australian Bureau of Statistics, particularly through the National Census, the Disability Services National Minimum Data Set and the

Nationally Consistent Data Collection on School Students with Disability tool (recommendation 1);

- assess the financial cost, timeframe and research benefits of a project that maps language support services across Australia against the Australian Early Development Index information about vulnerable communities (recommendation 3);
- develop a position paper on the likely impact of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) on speech pathology services in Australia. The paper should consider, among other matters, the need for greater numbers of trained speech pathologists as a result of increased demand for speech pathologist services arising from the introduction of the NDIS (recommendation 5);
- develop a strategy to broaden the opportunities for speech pathology students to undertake clinical placements that satisfy the profession's Competency-based Occupational Standards (recommendation 6);
- investigate the evidence of geographical and demographic clustering of speech pathology services in Australia, with particular reference to the proportion of new graduates moving into regional and remote areas of Australia and the attitude of graduates generally to working in a regional or remote location (recommendation 7); and
- prepare a position paper on the most appropriate model of service provision for speech pathologists working in early childhood intervention services, the education system, the justice system, the health system and the residential aged-care environment (recommendation 8).

7.5 In the committee's view, the recommendations made in this report are the platform that is needed to begin to address the concerns of people with speech and language disorders, their parents and carers and the concerns of the profession. They impress the need for an evidence-based, collaborative approach to identifying and addressing these needs.

7.6 The successful implementation of these recommendations will depend on a genuinely collaborative approach among a range of key stakeholders. For example, recommendation 1 on the current gaps in data and the merit of gathering further data through the ABS will require broad-based consultation among a wide range of stakeholders. This task should be informed by a range of organisations including, but not limited to:

- Speech Pathology Australia;
- the Centre for Clinical Research Excellence Aphasia Rehabilitation;
- the Centre of Clinical Research Excellence in Childhood Language;
- the Australian Stuttering Research Centre;
- the Centre for Community Child Health;

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- the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research;
 - the Centre for Research Excellence in improving health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children;
 - the Heads of Discipline in Speech pathology from the Australian universities offering speech pathology courses;
 - the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare;
 - the State and Territory Governments;
 - the Australian Bureau of Statistics;
 - the Department of Social Services;
 - the federal Department of Education; and
 - the federal Department of Employment.

7.7 It will be important to engage a similarly broad cross-section of stakeholders to undertake the position papers on the likely impact of the NDIS on speech pathology services and the most appropriate model for service provision in different settings.

7.8 The committee is aware of some support—most notably from SPA—for a National Taskforce or a National Council for Speech Pathology. This option should not be discounted. There may be merit in the introduction of a formal platform to carry out some of the work the committee has outlined in this report and manage the task of targeting these services to areas of current and project demand. In the first instance, however, the committee believes that these tasks should be addressed by the federal government in partnership with key stakeholders from academia, the speech pathology profession and the state and territory governments.

7.9 Chapter 2 of this report focussed on why early and effective intervention in speech and language disorders is so important. In the committee's view, the key message that the federal government must convey is the significant benefits to both the individual and society from a strategy that prioritises early intervention of speech and language disorders.

7.10 This inquiry highlights the costs to the individual and to society from delays in intervention and failure to treat conditions and emphasises the significant personal benefit from access to timely, professional speech pathology services.

7.11 On both fronts—the benefits and the costs—the evidence that committee has gathered during this inquiry is compelling. What is now needed is a collaborative effort across the profession, and with the assistance of government, to research the precise dimensions of the problem and the best strategies to recognise the benefits of effective early intervention.

Recommendation 10

7.12 The committee recommends that the federal government, working with state and territory governments, consider the costs to the individual and to society of failing to intervene in a timely and effective way to address speech and language disorders in Australia and address these issues in the development of relevant policies and programs.

7.13 The committee recommends that the federal government work with state and territory governments and stakeholders to ensure that parents and carers have access to information about the significance of speech and language disorders and the services that they can access to address them.

Senator Rachel Siewert

Chair