

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Terms of reference

1.1 On 10 September 2009 the Senate referred the following matter to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee (the committee) for inquiry and report by the last sitting day in February 2010 (subsequently extended to 13 May 2010):

Hearing Health in Australia with particular reference to:

- (a) the extent, causes and costs of hearing impairment in Australia;
- (b) the implications of hearing impairment for individuals and the community;
- (c) the adequacy of access to hearing services, including assessment and support services, and hearing technologies;
- (d) the adequacy of current hearing health and research programs, including education and awareness programs; and
- (e) specific issues affecting Indigenous communities.

Conduct of the inquiry

1.2 The inquiry was advertised in *The Australian* and on the committee's website, inviting submissions from interested parties. The committee also wrote to relevant organisations and individuals notifying them of the inquiry and inviting submissions. Due to indications of considerable interest in the reference subject matter, the committee undertook to accept submissions throughout the course of the inquiry.

1.3 The committee received 184 public submissions, which were made available through the committee website.¹ A list of individuals and organisations that made submissions or provided other information authorised for publication by the committee is contained in Appendix 1.

1.4 The committee heard evidence in public at Canberra on 12 October 2009 and 19 March 2010; Sydney on 13 October and 11 November 2009; Brisbane on 7 December 2009; Melbourne on 8 December 2009; Perth on 9 December 2009; Darwin on 16 February 2010; and Alice Springs on 18 February 2010.

1.5 A list of the witnesses who appeared at public hearings and details of the committee's visits and inspections is at Appendix 2.

1 Submissions can be viewed at http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/clac_ctte/hearing_health/submissions/sublist.htm

Background

1.6 For some time, the committee has considered that there was a need for a review of hearing services in Australia. The publication of the Access Economics report, *Listen Hear! The economic impact and cost of hearing loss in Australia* in 2006, as well as personal representations by a number of hearing impaired people, provided the impetus for the inquiry.

1.7 The committee initially considered that it would meet its original tabling date of February 2010. However as the inquiry progressed it became clear that there are many issues facing hearing impaired people which required further consideration by the committee. The committee received an extension to its tabling date from the Senate which has allowed it to consider the evidence provided more fully.

Structure of the report

1.8 The report is structured along the lines suggested by the terms of reference. Chapter two examines the extent and causes of hearing loss in Australia. Chapter three explores the costs of hearing impairment to Australia, and chapter four looks at the implications of hearing loss for individuals and for communities. Chapter five examines the many, sometimes complex, issues surrounding access to hearing assessment and support services, and to hearing technologies. Chapter six examines existing hearing health research programs, and chapter seven considers what the evidence suggested about future hearing health education and awareness campaigns. Lastly, chapter eight examines the particular hearing health issues faced by Indigenous Australians.

1.9 The committee makes its comments at the end of each chapter, before setting out its recommendations.

Listen Hear!

1.10 The committee has been fortunate to have access to *Listen Hear!* the 2006 report by Access Economics on the economic impact of hearing loss in Australia. This work was commissioned by the HEARing Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) and the Victorian Deaf Society to quantify the complex economic impact of hearing loss for the year 2005.² As the only study of its kind, *Listen Hear!* is a valuable resource for the committee and for hearing health policy makers. That it is highly regarded is reflected by the fact that nearly all submissions referred to its findings when discussing the costs of hearing health in Australia.

2 Access Economics, *Listen Hear! The economic impact and cost of hearing loss in Australia* (February 2006), p. 5.

Acknowledgements

1.11 During public hearings the committee used the services of Auslan and tactile interpreters as well as captioning services. The committee would like to thank: Tanya Miller, Kylie Scott, Kerrie Lakeman, Gerry Shearim and Denise Lamont (Sydney); Judy Bonser and Peter Bonser (Brisbane); Dennis Witcombe, Sarah Howell, Meredith Bartlett, Kathy Leibeck (Melbourne); and Elizabeth Temple (Darwin) for their assistance.

1.12 The committee visited the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children, Cochlear Limited and the National Acoustics Laboratory on 12 November 2009. For taking time out of their busy days, and for their generous hospitality, the committee would like to thank John Berryman, Greg Leigh and Jan North of the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children; Mark Salmon, Neville Mitchell and Georgina Sanderson from Cochlear Limited; and Harvey Dillon and Margaret Dewberry of National Acoustics Laboratory.

1.13 The committee would like to thank the many individuals and organisations who provided submissions to the inquiry. The submissions from organisations and stakeholder groups were of a high calibre, and underscored the strength of their commitment to providing high quality services and support to people with hearing impairment. The submissions from individuals often came directly from the heart, and canvassed the many day-to-day issues encountered by people with hearing impairment in Australia.

1.14 The Department of Health and Ageing provided valuable support to the committee during the conduct of the inquiry. Departmental officers provided background briefings to the committee secretariat on a range of hearing health issues, which contributed greatly to the clarity and accuracy of this report. The committee would like to sincerely thank the department for its professionalism, support and cooperation.

1.15 Finally, the committee wishes to express its appreciation for the work of the Senate Community Affairs Committee secretariat throughout this inquiry. The secretariat consistently provided professional, high quality support to the committee during the extensive hearings process, and during the preparation of this report.

Note on references

1.16 References to the committee Hansard from 2010 may relate to the proof Hansard: page numbers may vary between the proof and the official Hansard transcript.

