



for **Australian Hearing**

Impact of a sale of Australian Hearing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

The Australian Government is investigating the future ownership of Australian Hearing. If the sale proceeds it will introduce significant risks to the programs and services received by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and adults, and it could have a detrimental effect on the outcome for these clients.

Given the high prevalence of otitis media and associated hearing loss experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it is important for them to have access to the services provided by Australian Hearing under the Community Service Obligations component of the Australian Government Hearing Services Program.

There are approximately 2,200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are hearing impaired or Deaf and require ongoing hearing services from Australian Hearing. There are approximately 2,000 children who are not fitted with hearing devices but still require access to hearing assessment services annually at Australian Hearing. A similar number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults aged over 50 years receive hearing services from Australian Hearing each year.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and adults who are eligible to receive services from Australian Hearing can access services at mainstream hearing centres, or they may receive services through an outreach service at over 200 locations in urban, rural and remote areas of Australia. The aim of the outreach program is to provide a culturally sensitive program that is delivered in locations where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are likely to use the service. Services at these locations are planned in consultation with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services, State Government Community Health Services, parents, doctors, community elders, Aboriginal health and education workers, teachers, schools, parent committees, and non-government organisations.

Current arrangements with Australian Hearing as the sole provider of services to clients under the Community Service Obligations component of the Australian Government Hearing Services Program ensure:

- services are provided by Audiologists with an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture
- a consistent, high quality service to all clients regardless of where they access services
- services are provided by Audiologists with appropriate expertise in the delivery of services to children, particularly those with otitis media, and to adults with complex hearing rehabilitation needs
- clients are supported with interpreter services where needed
- information and services are always focussed on achieving the best outcome for the client
- clinical protocols and procedures are based on research evidence and regularly updated
- clients receive high quality devices at no cost
- the Australian Government receives the best value for money due to
 - the economies of scale achieved by Australian Hearing's purchasing power and
 - services being delivered as a Community Service Obligation. This arrangement ensures the Program benefits from the existing infrastructure of Australian Hearing as a provider in a broader market, and payments to Australian Hearing are based on the actual cost of service delivery without any profit margin

Any changes to existing arrangements introduces risks for the following reasons:

1. Expertise

There are no formal qualification in paediatric audiology or working with adults with complex hearing rehabilitation needs, and no there is no registration system for Audiologists. Australian Hearing provides in-house training and a support network to ensure that services are delivered by people with appropriate skills. Given the small client populations involved, there may not be interest from clinicians or the training institutions to take over this responsibility from Australian Hearing leaving high need clients without access to appropriately skilled clinicians.

2. Service access

Clients in rural and remote areas may lose access to services due to the cost of delivering services in these locations. Clients may lose access to interpreters due to the cost of providing these services

3. Technology

Technology levels may be reduced due to cost, or because the new Provider is aligned with a particular manufacturer. Technology recommendations from the Audiologist may be compromised due to the introduction of commercial practices such as financial incentives for fitting particular devices.

4. Advice and guidance

Advice and guidance may no longer be impartial if the new Provider is aligned with a particular educational provider or device manufacturer.

5. Clinical programs

Programs for high need clients are very time intensive. There is a risk that these clients may not be provided with the time they need.

6. Newborn hearing screening referrals

The success of newborn hearing screening programs is dependent on strong relationships between the diagnostic hospital and Australian Hearing which ensures timely appointments and reduces the risk of children being lost in the system. There is a higher risk of infants being lost to follow up if there are multiple providers.

Changing the service delivery arrangements to a private provider will increase the cost of the Program as a profit would need to be factored into the payment schedule. This will have a flow on effect to the cost of providing services under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) as Deaf and hearing impaired children and eligible adults with complex hearing needs at the NDIS pilot sites are currently seen by Australian Hearing under the Community Service Obligations Program. Clients and their families are concerned that the services they receive will be reduced in order to pay a commercial rate to the private sector.

The decision on the sale of Australian Hearing is not only about the financial benefit that may result from the sale of a Government asset. More importantly the decision has to be considered in the context of the impact it will have on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and adults who are hearing impaired or Deaf.

It is essential to ensure that the needs of these clients are protected, and that client outcomes are not compromised if the sale proceeds.

This report was prepared by Deafness Forum, with acknowledgement to its researcher and author Margaret Dewberry.

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