



for **Australian Hearing**

Impact of a sale of Australian Hearing on adults with complex hearing rehabilitation needs

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 adults with complex hearing rehabilitation needs, and consequently could have a detrimental effect on the outcome for these clients.

There are approximately 20,000 hearing impaired and Deaf adults with complex hearing needs across Australia who receive services from Australian Hearing under the Community Service Obligations component of the Australian Government Hearing Services Program. This client group is likely to increase over time due to the ageing population. A high proportion of these clients have hearing loss and other disabilities such as vision impairment, dementia etc.

Eligible adults with severe to profound hearing loss, or hearing loss and other disabilities are seen by Australian Hearing Audiologists with the skills to manage the special needs of this highly vulnerable client group. Client programs are delivered according to international best practice standards. The services incorporate the principles of Access and Equity and Social Inclusion. Current arrangements ensure the Australian Government receives the best value for money due to:

- the economies of scale achieved by Australian Hearing's purchasing power
- services being delivered as a Community Service Obligation. This arrangement ensures the Program for adults with complex hearing needs 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
- services for frail elderly clients are tailored to their needs leading to better outcomes and less wastage from the fitting of devices that are never used

Clients value the following Program components:

- the service is provided by highly skilled clinicians
- the client receives the services and devices they need to achieve the best outcome
- there are strong relationships between audiological services and other support services including referrers
- the clinical programs are research based and supported by clinical protocols
- the programs are solely focussed on achieving the best outcome for the client and are not influenced by commercial practices such as sales targets or financial incentives
- services are equitable and not based on the person's ability to pay
- information and guidance is impartial and unbiased
- services are well located to minimise the need for travel

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

1. Expertise

There are no formal qualifications in working with clients with complex hearing rehabilitation needs and no registration system for Audiologists. Australian Hearing provides in-house training and a support network for its clinicians to ensure that services are delivered by people with appropriate skills. Given the small client population 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 from culturally and linguistically diverse clients may lose access to interpreters and translated materials 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 particular manufacturer. Technology recommendations from the client's Audiologist may be compromised due to the introduction of commercial practices such as financial incentives for fitting particular devices.

4. Clinical programs

Programs for adults with complex hearing rehabilitation needs are very time intensive. There is a risk that clients and their carers may not be provided with the time they need.

5. Services for frail elderly clients

Australian Hearing has developed an evidence based program to meet the particular needs of frail elderly clients in residential aged care facilities. The program is less device focussed and concentrates more on improving the environment to enhance communication and educating staff and carers. This program may be lost under changed service delivery arrangements.

Because services for adults with complex hearing rehabilitation needs are time intensive and less device focussed, the work is less appealing from a commercial perspective as it is difficult to make it profitable. Making the contract to deliver the program for adults with complex hearing needs a condition of the sale of Australian Hearing might appear to protect the interests of this client group, however there is no guarantee that the new owner would give the program for adults with complex hearing needs the priority that it currently receives by being delivered by a Government Provider; and the new owner may not wish to continue with the arrangement at the end of the contract, leaving highly vulnerable hearing impaired and Deaf people with no reliable service.

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 well, as many hearing impaired and Deaf adults will qualify for services under the NDIS and the clients with more complex hearing needs at the NDIS pilot sites are currently streamed to the Community Service Obligations Program. Clients and their families and carers are concerned that services will be reduced in order to offset the cost of paying a commercial rate to the private sector.

The decision on the sale of Australian Hearing is not only about the financial benefit that may be realised from the sale of a Government asset. More importantly a decision on the sale has to be considered in the context of the impact it will have on the lives of highly vulnerable Deaf and hearing impaired adults and their families and carers.

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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