

INDIGENOUS HEARING POLICY



There is a crisis in Indigenous ear and hearing health in Australia. The causes and consequences of large scale hearing impairment for Indigenous Australians are not yet fully understood, however evidenceⁱ strongly suggests that its roots lie in poverty and disadvantage. It has a significant impact on education and employment outcomes and sadly, has a strong association with Indigenous engagement with the criminal justice system.

Early detection of ear disease through primary hearing health screening by Aboriginal Health Workers and nurse practitioners employed in medical services can result in early treatment and follow-up and may prevent or reduce hearing loss. However, Indigenous children can have a persistent (often fluctuating) hearing loss, even with good medical or surgical careⁱⁱ.

The consequences of early onset hearing loss can be devastating for Indigenous Australians. Hearing loss impacts on their education, affecting their entire lives. Chronic ear disease is so prevalent among Indigenous communities that in some areas it becomes normalised, further entrenching social disadvantage and making it even more difficult to treat. Hearing loss can lead to poor communications with serious consequences, for example leading to confrontations with police.

Indigenous children have exceptionally high rates of middle-ear infection (otitis media) during early childhood. The rate of middle ear infection far exceeds the level that the World Health Organisation describes as 'a massive public health problem'. There are also high rates for children of school age. For many Indigenous children, English is their second language. The combination of hearing loss, listening in a second language, and classrooms that are acoustically reverberant result in greatly reduced ability of Indigenous children to understand the lessons they are being taught in school. This combination is thus part of a long-term cycle where poor hearing leads to poor education, with consequent poorer employment and lower income prospects, lower living conditions and poorer health, including poor hearing.

It is possible to break this cycle by ensuring good hearing in school. The necessary technology exists – acoustic absorption to make rooms less reverberant and a sound-field amplification system (a low-power PA system with a wireless microphone) to give all children in the class a louder and clearer signal. The system provides proven educational benefits, even in classrooms where there is not a high prevalence of hearing loss.ⁱⁱⁱ

INDIGENOUS HEARING POLICY



Specific proposals:

- Changes to Medicare to enable specialists and practitioners to receive public funding for ear health services provided remotely via ear telehealth.
- Priority for hearing screenings and follow up for Indigenous children from remote communities on commencement of school.
- Induction programs for teachers posted to schools in Indigenous communities, including training about the effects of hearing health on education, and effective, evidence-based teaching strategies to manage classrooms where a majority of children are hearing impaired.
- Enable Australian Hearing, under the Australian Hearing Services Act 1991, to supply and maintain sound field systems for classrooms in new classrooms, and in existing classrooms where there is a significant population of Indigenous children.
- Correctional facilities) to review their facilities and practices so that the needs of hearing impaired prisoners are met.

i Let Us Hear, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, chapter 8'Specific hearing health issues affecting indigenous communities'

ii Australian Hearing Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia – Oct 2009, pp.19

iii Massie, R, Theodoros, D. Byrne, D, McPherson, B & Smaldino, J. The effects of soundfield amplification on the communicative interactions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Audiology, 21 (12), 93-109, 1999