



23 December 2016

Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport  
Inquiry into the Hearing Health & Wellbeing of Australia  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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Ambassador: Jamie-Lee Lewis

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please accept our submission to support the inquiry into the Hearing Health and Wellbeing of Australia. We have outlined below details and facts to support our submission.

Deaf Sports Australia (DSA) holds a strong and critical leadership position within the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community and we recognise the important role that sport can play in ensuring high quality hearing health and wellbeing of Australians is achieved.

Briefly, DSA is the peak body for deaf sport in Australia established in 1954 and is affiliated with the International Committee of Sports for the Deaf. The vision is *to facilitate and support the participation of deaf Australians in all levels of sport.*

Among our objectives are to:

- To be the peak body for deaf and hard of hearing sport in Australia;
- To foster, promote and encourage deaf and hard of hearing people's participation and skill development in all forms of sport in partnership with our members;
- To continually advocate, educate, inform and support the mainstream sporting structure to make it deaf and hard of hearing friendly and capable of including deaf people within the structure;
- To foster relationships with government, deaf and mainstream sporting bodies to support the access requirements and participation of deaf people in sport at all levels; and
- To be a role model organisation for fostering leadership and mentoring in deaf and hard of hearing sport, which includes our *Active Deaf* program.

DSA currently has 15 *National Deaf Sport Committees* and 6 *State/ Territory Deaf Sport Organisations* as members and our *Australian Deaf Games* has over 1,000 deaf and hard of hearing people and their families attending this event.

Our *Active Deaf Kids* is a national program that reaches over 3,000 Australian Deaf and hard of hearing kids, helping them to participate in sports, meet other kids like them and provides awareness training for coaches and clubs. An example of the validity and impact of the

program is show in Lucy's story: <http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-17/making-sport-more-inclusive-for-deaf-athletes/7423114>

This background and history of our organisation provides us with a substantial voice of the community where we are in a position to provide accurate and contemporary comment about policy and service directions that impact on deaf and hard of hearing Australians.

We welcome the opportunity to participate and respond to the Inquiry and wish to make to following comments in relation to several Terms of Reference items:

The Deaf and Hard of Hearing community sports participation rates are substantially below mainstream society, primarily due to issues regarding the communication barrier and access to services.

***Term of Reference #2. Community awareness, information, education and promotion about hearing loss and health care;***

The Deaf and Hard of Hearing person's ability to participate in all forms of community activities (including sport) are substantially below mainstream society, primarily due to issues regarding the communication barriers and access to services. Access Economics Report *Listen HEAR!* (2006), *Hear Us: Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia* conducted by the Senate in 2010 and more recently Conexu Foundation's *National User Needs Survey* (preliminary draft report – available on request) conducted in 2016 supports this.

The Conexu survey which received responses from 379 deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind and speech impaired adults and 46 parents from across Australia, provides significant evidence that needs to be acknowledged and acted on by the Inquiry panel members:

*“Regardless of demographics or disability type, the majority (93%) of children who are Deaf, hard of hearing or who have a speech impairment experience difficulties communicating on a daily basis. Children find communication challenging in all of the situations presented, with at least two-thirds finding the following situations most difficult to communicate in:*

*Playing sport (78% very or quite difficult)*

*Going to the doctor or in hospital (71% very or quite difficult)*

*General socialising (70% very or quite difficult)*

*Using public transport (69% very or quite difficult),*

page 22.

*“Communicating with family and friends appears to be the easiest for children out of the activities presented, although even this is still challenging. Two in five (44%) find communicating with friends and family easy, however around the same proportion (47%) find it difficult.”* page 22.

While hearing loss is not a visible disability, there are mental health risks for those who struggle to participate and communicate effectively on a daily basis. Deaf Sports Australia

believes there needs to be greater awareness of hearing loss and this starts with the families, in the school, sports and community clubs and workplaces.

In order to take our own steps on negating these barriers and reaching out to the wider sports community, Deaf Sports Australia established the *Active Deaf* program which includes *Active Deaf Kids* and *Active Deaf Sports Club* programs. Over the last 4 years, over 3,000 young deaf and hard of hearing children have been through our *Active Deaf Kids* program and are now more aware that there are pathways for them to find their identity, participation opportunities and develop directions that will enable them to better manage barriers that they come across on an everyday basis.

Our *Active Deaf Sports Club* delivers hearing loss awareness sessions as well as sports specific Auslan (Australian Sign Language) classes for coaches so that they can communicate with their participants. The challenge with this program is that DSA is financially restricted and has only one staff managing the organisation to deliver the program effectively across Australia.

In order for Deaf Sports Australia to assist others with reducing barriers and improving hearing health and wellbeing of deaf and hard of hearing Australians, we need to better market the programs which would target:

- Schools where deaf and hard of hearing students attend;
- Existing deaf social and community groups (more than 300 in Australia);
- Key service providers accessed by the deaf community (audiology centres, captioned cinema services, Auslan interpreting services etc.); and
- The existing networks and membership of deaf stakeholders (Deaf Australia, Deafness Forum, Deaf Children Australia).

While it is recognised that much work has been done over the years to market and promote sport by individual sports and Government, its effectiveness in reaching and making an impact on the deaf community is questionable. The Australian deaf community relies on Auslan and a wide variety of other non-traditional communication mechanisms including captioning and it does not easily access the promotional campaigns designed for mainstream society.

At the policy and funding level which is mainly managed by government and advisory boards, presently there are no deaf or hard of hearing Australians on major sports board and committees given the opportunity with making key policy decisions in Australian sports. Examples of recent sports committees that deaf and hard of hearing Australians had no representation, consultation or speakers at include:

- Sport Inclusion Australia Forum
- All Abilities Inclusion Forum
- Senior executive positions and Board positions within Australian sports

What Deaf Sports Australia requests is that deaf and hard of hearing Australians be recognised and included in all appropriate committees and forums across Australian sports so that our views, recommendations and expertise can assist with the goals they seek to achieve and include the needs of deaf and hard of hearing people.

***Term of Reference #3. Access to, and cost of services, which include hearing assessments, treatment and support, Auslan language services, and new hearing aid technology;***

*“His cochlear implants and his FM system. My son is a keen sporting participant. We have huge issues with him being on an equal basis as other competitors. He needs a better system in place for him to start races whether they are track and field or swimming events.” – 2016 Conexu Foundation National User Needs Survey preliminary findings. Page 44*

Presently Deaf Australians do not receive support for the provision of Auslan Interpreters to allow them to participate in activities run by National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) such as coaching courses, workshops and other events. This has led to a very low number of deaf and hard of hearing coaches and officials in Australia, and the ability of our top athletes to attend high performance programs, something that DSA is extremely concerned about.

DSA appreciates the limited financial resources available to NSOs and suggests that work could be done to establish a Nationwide Sports Interpreting Fund similar to what currently exists in the employment and medical sectors to help ease the financial burden on DSA and sporting bodies, and to create opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing people to contribute to the sporting field.

In addition, with the advent of technology, there needs to be an efficient uptake of modified sport equipment such as the Deaf Starter Light system which is a visual starting “gun” for both track and field, and swimming athletes. There are scarce resources available for a commissioned Research and Development to help design, develop and test a Deaf Starter Light system that is inexpensive, effective and scalable.

***Term of Reference #9. Whether hearing health and wellbeing should be considered as the next National Health Priority for Australia;***

In reference to the *2009 Exercise, Recreation and Sport Survey Annual Report* the Federal Government commented that:

*‘Increasing participation in sport and recreational activity is an important element for improving the health of the nation and the Australian Government is committed to improving participation levels through a number of broad and inclusive programs including people with a disability’*

Deaf Sports Australia welcomes the Federal Government’s approach however is greatly concerned that there is currently no specifically targeted or well resourced program to improve participation in sport in schools for deaf and hard of students. The 2016 Conexu survey’s preliminary findings indicates that many have 40% have *difficulty in participating in clubs, associations or sport.* page 50

DSA has led the way with our *Active Deaf* programs which has been supported by the Australian Sports Commission, but this needs ongoing support and expansion to meet wider needs.

The 2016 Conexu survey also provides useful evidence that more support needs to occur in education settings:

*Parents feel that their children do not have access to the same learning opportunities as their classmates, or have access to the technology to help them communicate at school. Further, around half of parents feel that their children's teachers and peers/classmates don't understand their communication needs.*

*Almost all parents (94%) say communication barriers at least sometimes negatively impact on their child at their place of study. One in three (32%) say their child is always negatively impacted..."*

*Communication barriers negatively impact adult students sometimes (45%) or most of the time (36%). One in four (27%) adult students find it very difficult to socialise during class breaks; a further 27% find it quite difficult. Two-thirds (64%) find it either quite or very difficult to participate fully in the classroom. Page 39*

*Degree of difficulty to participate in:*

*Excursions – 61%*

*Socialize during class breaks – 79%*

*Sporting activities – 73%*

*Playing sport – 68%*

*the classroom – 71%*                      page 43

## **Mental Health**

Around 160,000 young people in Australia aged between 12-18, live with depression and depression is known to have a significantly higher incidence within the deaf community with recent research finding that six in ten people with a hearing loss have shown signs of depression, compared to the overall average of one in five Australians.<sup>1</sup>

Deaf Victoria's *Let's Talk about Mental Health and deaf people* Report (2016) highlights the ongoing plight of lack of support service access, expertise in deafness in the sector and lack of role models to reduce the potential risks:

<http://thesignsoflife.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Deaf-Mental-Health-report-ONLINE.pdf>

## **Childhood Obesity**

The latest National Health Survey revealed that an estimated 1.5 million people under 18 are considered overweight or obese. The existence of a childhood obesity epidemic in Australia

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<sup>1</sup> Beyond Blue Fact Sheet 33 – Depression in people who are deaf or hard of hearing

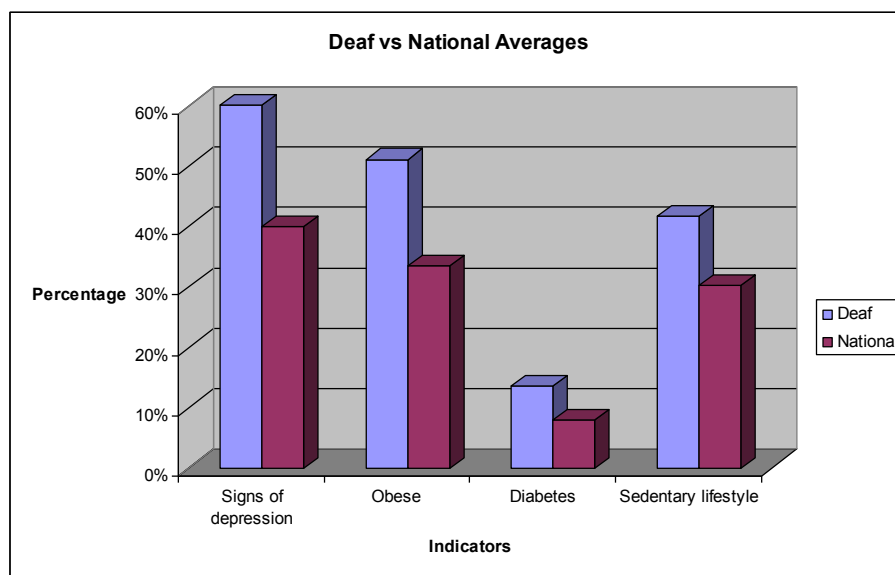
and cost to the health system as they progress to adulthood is well recognised. The incidence of childhood obesity in the deaf community is higher than the national average.<sup>2</sup>

### Lack of specialist educational support

Children who are Deaf or hard of hearing have poorer educational outcomes than mainstream school children. Over 83% of Deaf and hard of hearing children attend mainstream schools, however, there is a significant variation in the level of specialist support across the country and many mainstream schools have a lack of qualified staff.<sup>3</sup>

### Lack of role models within the deaf community

With 83% of deaf and hard of hearing children attending mainstream schools, chances are they will find themselves the only deaf child in their class or even their entire school. Many may have never met another deaf person until they have left school. It is important that deaf and hard of hearing children are able to have access to deaf and hard of hearing role models with whom they can identify with and aspire to.



Presently DSA is making strides to improve participation through the *Active Deaf* programs and have worked hard with the Australian Sports Commission in developing its focus in this area; however, we are considerably financially under-resourced to reach this significant audience considering:

- 1 in 6 Australians are deaf or hard of hearing (3.5 million)<sup>4</sup>
- It has been projected that 1 in 4 Australians will have a hearing loss by 2050<sup>5</sup>

Since the inception of the *Active Deaf Kids* program in 2009, this initiative has seen enormous benefits where many deaf and hard of hearing students who have not met one another gain

<sup>2</sup> 2008 National Health Survey

<sup>3</sup> Access Economics – Listen Hear! The economic impact of hearing loss in Australia

<sup>4</sup> Access Economics, 2006

<sup>5</sup> Access Economics, 2006

confidence and acceptance of themselves through sports. To date, the program has reached over 3,000 students across Australia however much work still needs to be done.

*"The mainstream school sporting experience varies greatly between respondents, from successful integrated programs to no sport and no interest shown to students with disabilities"*  
– All Kids Can Play Report 2014

The quote above demonstrates the importance of the *Active Deaf Kids* program as it reaches into mainstream schools that cater for deaf and hard of hearing students. The program also helps to build bridges between the school and opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing kids to participate in sports, health and well-being activities.

The Active Deaf Kids program is unique in helping to bridge these gaps as shown in the links below:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-17/sports-clinic-held-for-deaf-children-held-in-perth/7760808>

<http://deafsports.org.au/blog/entry/activedeafkidsgofarnorthqueensland>

<http://www.tennis.com.au/act/news/2012/07/16/lundy-plays-mlc-tennis-hot-shots>

*"Physical activity and sports are generally promoted for their positive effect on children's physical health; regular participation in physical activity in childhood is associated with a decreased cardiovascular risk in youth and adulthood. There is also a growing body of literature suggesting that physical activity has beneficial effects on several mental health outcomes, including health-related quality of life and better mood states.*

*In addition... there is a strong belief that regular participation in physical activity is linked to enhancement of brain function and cognition, thereby positively influencing academic performance." - Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine January 2012*

Not only deaf and hard of hearing kids have opportunities to participate at grassroots levels, they are also given an additional choice to pursue their athletic excellence by partaking in the Deaflympic Games, equivalent to the Olympic Games for deaf athletes only. The current elite athlete program for deaf and hard of hearing participants is structured in a way that Deaf Sports does not receive the same recognition and support as other disability sport organisations, particularly the Paralympics. The Deaflympic Games, under the patronage of the International Olympic Committee, is the pinnacle of international competition for any deaf athletes and holds significant importance and value within the deaf community.

DSA welcomes the opportunity for deaf and hard of hearing athletes to be provided the same support as their Olympians and Paralympians.

Key Recommendations for the Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport to:

1. Recognise the need of boosting the *Active Deaf* programs for kids and adults alike, and to commit an ongoing and designated funding to ensure the programs are sustainable and beneficial to Australian society and the sporting community.
2. Encourage sporting policy makers, boards, forums and committees to implement a strategy to introduce and increase deaf and hard of hearing representations on various sporting bodies in light of creating awareness, positive influence, recommendations and inclusion of deaf and hard of hearing Australians.
3. Introduce a Nationwide Sports Interpreting Fund for National Sporting Organisations, School Sports Programs, High Performing Programs, Sports Club and Elite Sports Programs.
4. Instigate a world-first Research and Development (R&D) into a Deaf Starter Light system that can be used and sold nationally and internationally that can be bought at a low-cost.
5. Support, encourage and value Australian Deaflympians to represent our country and bring home medals for young aspiring deaf athletes to reach their dreams.

While we have focused on our area of expertise in sport, health and wellbeing, Deaf Sports Australia also strongly supports Deafness Forum Australia's submission to the Inquiry relating to all Terms of Reference areas.

We welcome the opportunity to provide further input and comment as needed by the Senate Standing Committee during this inquiry. We wish you well in developing the report and recommendations which will further improve the lives, hearing health and wellbeing of deaf and hard of hearing Australians.

Regards,

Garry West-Bail  
General Manager  
Deaf Sports Australia