

POSITION STATEMENT

TITLE: ACCESS TO INTERPRETERS FOR MEDICAL APPOINTMENTS

ISSUE:

Auslan-using (and other sign language-using) Deaf people are currently denied equal access to private medical services and are being placed in an unenviable position of having to make a decision as to whether they can afford to pay for an Auslan (or other sign language) interpreter to be present at a medical appointment.

The Commonwealth Health Insurance Act (1973) does not define an interpreter to be a 'clinically relevant service ... necessary for the appropriate treatment of the patient.'

A free interpreting service is currently available for medical practitioners to help them communicate with patients from non-English speaking backgrounds. This does not include Auslan.

Deaf people who are unable to afford health services can suffer severely disadvantaged lives. Their inability to participate fully in the life of their community places them at high risk of developing both health and health-related problems arising from these communication difficulties and social isolation.

There is a growing sense of inequality in the life of a Deaf person where they have to pay an additional cost for an interpreter to access services that other members of the community can access at no additional cost. Interpreters are not seen by government to be 'clinically relevant' yet they are seen to be relevant in a number of other professions, such as the law. This results in the socially unacceptable situation arising in which an affluent Deaf person could afford an interpreter but a less affluent Deaf person has to go without this service.

The exclusion of interpreting services from Medicare benefits reinforces this inequity. It is not known whether the Australian Taxation Office would allow for the inclusion of an interpreter as a claimable item for medical expenses in an individual's annual tax return. This clearly would presuppose that a Deaf person earns enough money to pay tax.

Equity demands that the government funds appropriate interpreting service providers, to allow for free Auslan (or other sign language) interpreting services to be provided to medical practitioners to ensure correct and appropriate communication occurs with their patients.

In its 2004 Budget, the Commonwealth government allocated \$18.4m over four years to establish a national unit to book and pay for accredited Auslan interpreters. Deaf Auslan users, doctors and health professionals who require Auslan interpreters



for specified private medical or health consultations will be able to contact the unit to book an interpreter on a fee-free basis. That service is expected to commence operating in January 2005. The government excluded public health consultations on the grounds that those medical service providers should make interpreters available by utilising their existing funding sources.

POSITION:

That all medical practitioners and their patients are able to access Auslan (or other sign language) interpreters at no costs to the patients.

COSTS OF POSITION:

Cannot be fully assessed at this time. Accurate costing will depend on availability of accurate statistical data regarding the attendance by Deaf people to medical appointments (which are currently avoided due to the cost).

RESEARCH BASIS:

The Commonwealth Government commissioned research into the supply and demand for Auslan interpreters across Australia. The research, published in January 2004, showed the supply and demand situation in respect of Auslan interpreting at medical consultations, and was used as the basis for funding the new national Auslan booking and interpreting service referred to above.

APPROVED: Board, 17 June 2003.

REVIEWED: Board (25 October 2004). CEO (18 November 2004).

DATE OF NEXT SCHEDULED REVIEW: A Committee chaired by Deafness Forum Board member, Dr Therese Pierce, and comprising other interested Deafness Forum members is to be established to take responsibility for seeking implementation of the Position Statement .