



30 April 2020

**Mr Simon Cotterell PSM**  
**First Assistant Secretary**  
**COVID-19 Primary Care Response**  
**Health Pride Champion**  
**Department of Health**

Dear Mr Cotterell

Australian Government's Response Plan for COVID-19 pandemic

During an emergency good communication becomes of much greater importance and the need for communications to be both audible for vision impaired people and visible for hearing impaired people becomes essential, but sadly during the current virus emergency communications have been poor for people with a hearing impairment.

Why the reluctance to get the message out as widely as possible?

Two of the Response Plan's Principles refer to equity & being informed – these are lofty goals that have yet to be fleshed out in the Plan.

Well-designed and -delivered, timely communications are enablers for these Principles.

We wonder why Public Communication is in Phase 3 of the Plan, as it really should be at the forefront.

Phase 3 has it that there is a need for consultations with representatives of people with disability but surely this too should have higher priority.

Face masks block more than germs

A big issue for hearing impaired people – that's one in six Australians – is communicating with frontline health workers who wear facemasks. The unintended consequence of masks is that they make life a lot harder for people with hearing loss.

People who have substantial hearing loss use lip reading and facial expression to support their understanding of what is being said. For those with lesser levels of hearing loss, it might come as a surprise to discover how much *not* seeing someone's mouth impacts on their 'hearing' and comprehension.

There are surgical masks on the market that have a clear panel that allow the wearers' mouth to be seen. These seem like an excellent solution for those of us who rely on lipreading.

Speech-to-text apps use the microphone on a smart phone, tablet or other device, to pick up the speaker's voice and then translate it into text on the screen. Results can be mixed from good to poor.

Telehealth is a necessary means to provide services but unless video calls are separately captioned or augmented by an interpreter for people who rely on Auslan, it can be a highly unsatisfactory experience for all parties involved in a call.

## Information transmitted on television and in social media must be captioned

We support the current accessibility arrangement in Government announcements that includes a sign language interpreter for the 10,000 Australians whose first language is Auslan. However, on so many occasions the interpreter is a distant figure in the screen and the signing could not be followed on anything less than a large home TV screen.

Importantly, there is a large number of Australians – estimates are in excess of 1.2 million – who rely on captions every day. Captions are important for people for whom English is a second language, children with learning difficulties and particularly, older people who may use hearing aids or cochlear implants, and the many people who have no aided support to assist with their hearing. Captions are vital aids for hearing impaired people away from home and seeing an uncaptioned emergency message on a TV they cannot control, for example at airports, hospital waiting rooms and hotels.

The federal and state governments are placing ads on TV about coronavirus but are neglecting to caption them.

Emergency broadcasts and Government announcements on television must have Open Captions – these are captions that are a permanent feature of a video, meaning that you can't switch them off, so they will appear in any replays or simultaneous transmissions on social media.

Of particular note is frequent complaints about an absence of captions on ABC Channel 24 News.

Governments and TV broadcasters will say that such announcements are closed-captioned so people are able to access the information by choosing to display captions on the TV. But this ignores the facts that:

- Not everyone has a TV that will broadcast closed captions
- Not everyone understands how to activate closed captions
- Many people only turn on the closed captions for certain programs

## Service providers must provide accessible communications

We want providers to offer the option of text messaging versus verbal telephone contact, and use of the National Relay Service and National Auslan Booking Service (the latter for medical and health-related appointments).

Video and video conferences must be captioned to all forms of media.

We hope these are helpful inputs to this important Response Plan. Please do not hesitate to contact me if further information is required.

Deafness Forum of Australia is the peak national body representing the interests of the 3.5 million Australians who live with hearing impairment. Our constituency is people with hearing loss, ear and balance disorders, people who communicate using Australian Sign Language (Auslan), and their families. Membership also includes organisations that represent these people; and individuals and associations which provide services that promote hearing health and wellbeing. Deafness Forum is Australia's representative for all consumers in the World Hearing Forum, a global network of stakeholders promoting ear and hearing care.

Yours sincerely



Stephen Williamson  
Chief Executive