



HEARING HEALTH CARE FOR ADULTS: PRIORITIES FOR IMPROVING ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY

The National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine released a report this year on Hearing Health Care for Adults. The report examines the hearing health care system in the United States of America, with a focus on devices and services and offers recommendations for improving access and affordability of hearing health care for adults of all ages.

While the service delivery and funding arrangements for hearing services are different in America compared with Australia, many of the issues raised in the report are similar to those experienced by Deaf and hearing impaired people in Australia. The report recommendations are relevant to the circumstances in Australia and support the Deafness Forum of Australia campaign to make hearing health a national health priority in Australia.

The key findings of the report are:

- Hearing is vital to communications, health, function, and quality of life. Individuals need to be alert to their hearing health, as hearing loss can range from mild to profound and tends to increase with age, onset can be gradual, and each individual's hearing needs are unique.
- Hearing health care involves a wide range of services and technologies with ever-expanding and evolving options; however, many people do not have access to these options or cannot afford them.
- Hearing loss is a public health and societal concern; engagement and action are needed across the spectrum of relevant stakeholders, including individuals and families, professionals, nonprofit organisations, industries, government, and the health care community.

The recommended actions that are relevant to the Australian environment are:

- Improve population-based information on hearing loss and hearing health care
- Develop and promote measures to assess and improve quality of hearing health care services
- Empower consumers and patients in their use of hearing health care
- Improve access to hearing health care for underserved and vulnerable populations
- Promote hearing health care in wellness and medical visits for those with concerns about their hearing
- Improve affordability of hearing health care by actions across federal, state, and private sectors
- Evaluate and implement innovative models of hearing health care to improve access, quality, and affordability
- Improve publicly available information on hearing health
- Promote individual, employer, private sector, and community-based actions to support and manage hearing health and effective communication

NOTE: All findings and recommended actions are of equal importance and are not prioritised.

REPORT FINDINGS AND APPLICATION IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

The loss of hearing to any degree and at any stage of life can have a significant impact on a person's communication abilities, quality of life, social participation, and health. Globally, hearing loss has been identified as the fifth leading cause of years lived with disability. Age-related hearing loss is of increasing public health concern as the older adult population grows.

UNDERSTANDING THE EXTENT AND IMPACT OF HEARING LOSS

The effects of hearing loss on communication, social interactions and functional abilities have serious public health implications for adults of all ages. Among older adults—a growing demographic in the United States and globally—hearing loss is a common, chronic disability that increases with age. A link between hearing ability and cognitive function and dementia has long been recognized but has only recently begun to be systematically studied. Cross-sectional studies have examined the association of hearing loss with falls, declines in physical functioning, and hospitalization, but population-based longitudinal studies are lacking. The potential economic impacts of hearing loss, including reduced income and increases in unemployment or underemployment, have been modeled, but population-based longitudinal data are needed.

Goal: Improve Population-Based Information on Hearing Loss and Hearing Health Care

Australian context: *As in America, Australia has an ageing population and needs to strengthen efforts to collect, analyze, and disseminate prospective population-based data on hearing loss in adults and the effects of hearing loss and its treatment on patient outcomes.*

HEARING HEALTH CARE SERVICES: IMPROVING ACCESS AND QUALITY

- a) The systematic and comprehensive assessment of an individual's hearing difficulties, the diagnosis of underlying medical conditions, the evaluation of the individual's hearing loss and treatment needs, auditory rehabilitation, and counseling and other services help an individual to maximize his or her hearing and communication abilities. Navigating the hearing health care system can be confusing. Entry into the hearing health care system can occur through multiple pathways (audiologists, hearing instrument specialists, otolaryngologists, primary care providers, self-service, and others). Consumers can be left with no clear guidance on what will best fit their financial, health, social, and hearing needs. When consumers are left to traverse this complex system, they can find the process and outcomes to be frustrating and unsatisfactory. For the most part, little is known about the relative effectiveness or quality of these services. Guidelines, standards, and metrics must be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that the most recent evidence is translated into best practices for hearing health care professionals and is disseminated to people with hearing loss and their families.

Goal: Develop and Promote Measures to Assess and Improve Quality of Hearing Health Care Services

- Align and promote best practices and core competencies across the continuum of hearing health care, and implement mechanisms to ensure widespread adherence; and
- Research, develop, and implement a set of quality metrics and measures to evaluate hearing health care services with the end goal of improving hearing- and communication-focused patient outcomes.

Australian context: *This point is particularly relevant for Australia where there are multiple government programs to support people with hearing issues, inconsistency in access to State Government programs and a lack of transparency regarding the quality framework that applies to service delivery in the private sector. The National Disability Insurance Scheme is currently rolling out which will introduce contestability into paediatric hearing rehabilitation service delivery for the first time. It is essential that guidelines, standards and metrics be developed that will safeguard the needs of all Australians with hearing loss, particularly the more vulnerable groups such as paediatric clients, the frail elderly and people with multiple disabilities. This recommendation is consistent with the campaign to make hearing health a*

national priority in relation to the need to ensure that children don't fall through the gaps with changes to the way hearing services will be delivered in Australia.

- b) Hearing health care does not reach all who need it. Residents of rural and low income urban areas are at a particular disadvantage in accessing care. Furthermore, the minimal diversity in the hearing health care workforce does not mirror the wide diversity in the population of adults this workforce serves. With the high incidence of hearing loss in the adult population and the low utilization of the hearing health care system, efforts should be made to provide easier access for all, especially those for whom socioeconomic barriers exist.

Goal: Improve Access to Hearing Health Care for Underserved and Vulnerable Populations

- Collaborate and partner with health care providers to ensure hearing health care accessibility throughout rural and underserved areas using mechanisms such as telehealth, outreach clinics (including federally qualified community health centers), and community health workers;
- Support and promote programs, including incentives such as tuition assistance to increase diversity in all sectors of the hearing health care workforce; and
- Promote the training of cultural competency in the hearing health care workforce and incentivize practice in underserved communities.

Australian context: *This recommendation is particularly relevant for Australia where access to hearing services in rural and remote locations presents many challenges and underserved and vulnerable populations can experience barriers to access due to the lack of funded interpreter services. Remuneration for service providers needs to incorporate the additional costs incurred in providing services to rural and remote locations and the provision of interpreter services.*

- c) Hearing is often overlooked in adult medical and wellness visits because of the large number of other health conditions and concerns that must be assessed or, in the case of older adults, because of the assumption that hearing loss is typical and cannot be helped. However, increasing evidence shows that hearing is important for health, and the potential for miscommunication with health care providers due to hearing loss demonstrates the importance of paying attention to hearing ability during medical and wellness visits. Furthermore, health care providers should be aware of the importance of hearing and the need to emphasize, rather than dismiss, hearing concerns during health care visits.

Goal: Promote Hearing Health Care in Wellness and Medical Visits

Health care professional schools and associations, advocacy organizations, health care providers, and individuals and their families should promote hearing health in regular medical and wellness visits

Specifically,

- Use patient visits to assess and discuss potential hearing difficulties that could affect doctor–patient communication and overall patient well-being, to encourage individuals and their family members and caregivers to discuss hearing concerns, to raise awareness among older adults about age-related hearing loss, and to encourage referral when appropriate; and
- Develop and disseminate core competencies, curricula, and continuing education opportunities focused on hearing health care, particularly for primary care providers.

Australian context: *This recommendation is consistent with the Deafness Forum of Australia campaign to make hearing health at national priority which recommends hearing checks for children at key stages of life and universal access to hearing health checks every five years for people over 50. The goal is also consistent with the Clinical Care Guidelines for the management of Otitis Media in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Populations which recommends surveillance for ear disease as part of routine health checks.*

IMPROVING AFFORDABILITY OF SERVICES AND TECHNOLOGIES

- a) For many people cost can be a key factor in making health care decisions; for some people cost can be the driving factor, including determining whether to forego the care entirely. The cost of hearing health care includes the cost of services and technologies, and these costs may be incurred multiple times over a period of many years in order to maintain and replace hearing aids and other technologies, to continue to monitor hearing status, and to retain the benefit from auditory rehabilitation and other services.

Goal: Improve Affordability of Hearing Health Care

***Australian context:** While the National Disability Insurance Scheme will assist those with profound hearing loss, there will be many people who will not be eligible for this program and will have to continue to fund their own hearing services. It is for this reason that Deafness Forum of Australia is asking that hearing devices be tax deductible as part of its campaign to make hearing health a national health priority.*

- b) There are many unknowns in the hearing health care system. The comparative effectiveness of different care delivery models, the health and economic benefits of identifying and treating adult hearing loss early, and the potential for new technologies to disrupt and improve care are just a few of the areas where more research and evaluation are needed. An understanding of these issues will be necessary to continue making strides forward in improving accessibility to and affordability of hearing health care for all.

Goal: Evaluate and Implement Innovative Models of Hearing Health Care to Improve Access, Quality, and Affordability

Researchers, and health care systems should prioritize and fund demonstration projects and studies, including randomized controlled trials, to improve the evidence base for current and innovative payment and delivery models for treating hearing loss.

Specifically,

- Innovative models to be evaluated should include, but not be limited to, community health workers, telehealth, mobile health, retail clinics, and self-administered hearing health care. These projects and studies should include outcomes that are patient-centered and assess value, comparative effectiveness, and cost effectiveness.
- Demonstration projects should evaluate the health impact of beneficiary direct access to audiologist-based hearing-related diagnostic services, specifically to clarify impact on hearing health care accessibility, safety, and the effectiveness of the medical home. Successful outcomes would provide evidence of effective communication and coordination of care with primary care providers within a model of integrated health care, and evidence of appropriate identification and referral for evaluation of medical conditions related to hearing loss and otologic disease.
- Models that are found to be most effective should be widely implemented.

***Australian context:** The technologies and service delivery options in the hearing services industry are also rapidly changing in Australia. These changes need to be accommodated within Government funded programs including the Australian Government Hearing Services Program, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, State government, not for profit hearing service delivery programs and the private market.*

ENGAGING A WIDER COMMUNITY: AWARENESS, EDUCATION, AND SUPPORT

Hearing plays a vital role in how individuals experience, interact with, and relate to the people and environment around them. Hearing is sometimes referred to as the “social sense” because of its function in developing and maintaining intimate relationships and social connections with family, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances. Supporting individuals with hearing loss requires adaptable solutions that span society—not just solutions within the context of a medical model that revolves around delivery of care and services in a health care setting. These solutions should reduce stigma and negative media perceptions and ensure that consumers understand their hearing test results and have the information they need to compare devices and products and to determine pathways to accessing hearing health care services.

People with hearing loss experience a variety of challenges in terms of employment and the workplace, including obstacles related to finding employment, career development, promotion and career advancement, equitable compensation, and the balance between job demands and a sense of control and confidence in managing work-related situations. The Americans with Disabilities Act and related laws have provisions that improve access to hearing assistance in some settings, but it is not always adequate, and technology in public venues is not always functional. For people with hearing loss, the acoustics of the places where they live, work, learn, and socialize, the availability of hearing aids and hearing assistive technologies, and the ability to connect to other communications-enhancing systems may mean the difference between participating in and engaging with their community and feeling isolated. Raising public awareness of hearing health and of the range of options to facilitate communication is key and will require the collaboration of many groups. In addition, individuals, family members, employers, and communities can take actions to maximize hearing and facilitate communication for the benefit of all.

Goal: Improve Publicly Available Information on Hearing Health

State public health agencies, other relevant government agencies, advocacy organizations, hearing health care professional associations, hearing technology manufacturers, hearing health care professionals, and media organizations should improve public information on hearing health and hearing-related technologies and services and promote public awareness about hearing and hearing health care.

Specifically,

- Strengthen publicly available, evidence-based information on hearing through multiple avenues (e.g., centralized websites, community-based services, local councils on aging) that explain hearing and related health concerns for adults of all health literacy levels, and address the breadth of services and technologies, including their comparative effectiveness and costs;
- Work through media, social marketing, and public education campaigns to disseminate and evaluate key evidence-based messages about hearing and hearing health and to promote accuracy in media portrayals;
- Implement and support a consumer-based metric to enable individuals to understand and track their communication abilities and hearing needs and a consumer-oriented format for audiogram and other hearing test results;
- Adopt standardized terminology across manufacturers about the features and capabilities of hearing aids and hearing assistive technologies so that consumers and hearing health care professionals can make easy, clear, unambiguous comparisons; and
- Develop and disseminate criteria that individuals and families can use to evaluate and compare hearing-related products and services.

Australian context: *This goal supports the need for a national hearing awareness promotion campaign which is a recommendation from the campaign to make hearing health a national health priority.*

Goal: Promote Individual, Employer, Private-Sector, and Community-Based Actions to Support and Manage Hearing Health and Effective Communication

- Individuals, families, community-based organizations, advocacy organizations, employers, private-sector businesses, and government agencies (local, state, federal) should take actions to support and manage hearing health and foster environments that maximize hearing and communication for all individuals. Individuals and their family members can
 - Reduce exposure to noise that is at high volume levels for extended periods of time and use hearing protection as appropriate,
 - Be aware of and recognize difficulties in hearing and communication and seek information and care through the range of available services and technologies when appropriate, and
 - Seek out peer-support groups and other opportunities for those living with hearing loss, when appropriate.

- Community-based organizations, advocacy organizations, employers, private sector businesses, and government agencies (local, state, federal) should promote work and community environments that are conducive to effective communication and that support individuals with hearing loss. Specifically, they should:
 - Ensure compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and other related laws supporting people with disabilities and strive to exceed their minimum requirements;
 - Research and incorporate features into buildings and public spaces that improve hearing and communication (e.g., universal design, hearing assistive technologies).

Australian context: *This goal is consistent with the campaign to make hearing health a national health priority in relation to the need for improved accessibility for Auslan.*

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