

# Memo

**To:** Hon Carmel Sepuloni, Minister for Disability Issues

**From:** Brian Coffey, Director

**Date:** 20 July 2021

**Security level:** IN CONFIDENCE

---

## Information about hearing loss issues in Aotearoa New Zealand

### Purpose of this memo

The purpose of this memo is to inform you about:

- current research on hearing loss issues in Aotearoa New Zealand
- solutions put forward by various organisations supporting people with hearing loss.

### Summary

The following are the key issues that emerged from research commissioned by or undertaken by various organisations supporting people with hearing loss in New Zealand. The response to these issues will sit across a number of agencies, including but perhaps not exclusively, the Ministry of Health, Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), and the Ministry of Culture and Heritage (Broadcasting).

The issues identified through the meetings and submissions have been aligned under the following themes: Public awareness/prevention, Improved access to evidence-based services, Accommodations for those with hearing loss, Monitoring and evidence, and Workforce development.

These themes resemble a public health response to the range of issues identified through the meetings and submissions received, and provide a framing for a potentially more comprehensive, Ministry of Health-led interagency response.

### Public awareness/prevention

- Public awareness campaigns on hearing loss services and subsidies offered by government agencies, and hearing loss services provided by private providers are required.
- A whole-of-government approach to expanding access to screening for hearing loss is called for.

**Improved access to evidenced-based services**

- A review of government funding support for people with untreated hearing loss is needed, which could include a focus on:
  - affordability of hearing devices
  - equity of access to assessment and hearing devices
  - models to improve affordability of hearing devices.

**Accommodations for those with hearing loss**

- Information needs to be made more accessible to people with hearing loss (e.g., compulsory captioning across all media and video platforms).

**Monitoring and evidence**

- Data on degrees of hearing loss (mild, severe etc.) needs to be collected in government surveys (e.g., *2023 Disability Survey, New Zealand Health Survey*).
- Evidence needs to be collected on the economic benefits of investment in early assistance and improved access to services, including the well-being benefits.
- A review of government funding support for people with untreated hearing loss is needed.
- Are there other models that could be considered to meet the unmet needs of people with untreated hearing loss?

**Workforce development**

- Initiatives to increase the audiology workforce should be considered.

The details relating to these issues are contained in the following memo.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Brian Coffey  
Director

20/7/2021  
Date

## **Various organisations support people with hearing loss in New Zealand**

The **New Zealand Hearing Industry Association (NZHIA)** is a professional organisation representing the majority of private audiology service providers and manufacturers. NZHIA members are responsible for the testing, assessment, and fitting of over 90 percent of the hearing devices used in New Zealand.

NZHIA's recent work has focused on improving data on hearing loss and its impact. The organisation commissioned two research reports, *New Zealand Trak* (2018), and *Economic effects of hearing loss: A CGE modelling analysis* (June 2020) (which was published in partnership with the Employers and Manufacturers Association).

The data in NZHIA's *Briefing for the Incoming Minister* (16 November 2020) which your office received is taken from these reports.

**Hearing New Zealand (HNZ)**, founded in 1932, is the oldest and largest organisation working with deaf and hard-of-hearing people. HNZ is comprised of 20 member associations across New Zealand. The organisation provides one-to-one support and services (e.g., advice, equipment repairs, rest home visits) for the hearing impaired. HNZ is also involved in:

- educating (particularly, workshops in schools for youth) about noise damage to hearing
- commissioning and funding research on hearing and hearing loss.

HNZ provided your office with the briefing, *We can't afford not to...* (November 2020) in December 2020.

**National Foundation for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NFDHH)**, established in 1978, is a consortium of ten consumer and hearing-health professional member organisations. NFDHH is a charity that advocates for the hearing wellbeing of deaf and hard-of-hearing New Zealanders. The Foundation raises awareness of hearing loss and hearing loss prevention through:

- education
- sponsorship of screening programmes
- events (e.g., Hearing Week, Silent Leadership Challenge)
- national advocacy and support to improve public funding for hearing loss and access to services.

Of note is that NFDHH holds a more medical perspective on hearing loss.

NFDHH commissioned the research report, *Social and economic costs of hearing loss in New Zealand* (December 2016).

## **You, in your role as Minister for Disability Issues, met recently with a few organisations supporting people with hearing loss**

- On 15 April 2021, you met with Hearing New Zealand (HNZ) to discuss matters raised in their November briefing to you, *We can't afford not to...*, on hearing loss and associated issues. HNZ sought your support in progressing actions to address these hearing loss issues.
- On 20 May 2021, you met with the New Zealand Hearing Industry Association (NZHIA) and the Employers and Manufacturers Association (EMA) to discuss NZHIA's *Briefing for the Incoming Minister*. The discussion focused on:

- economic impact of hearing loss
- actions that can reduce the impact of hearing loss and maintain/increase employment
- opportunities for NZHIA and EMA to work with the Government to deliver economic and social gains.

## **Hearing loss is relatively common in New Zealand**

Hearing is the ability to detect vibrations through the ear and perceive and understand sound. It is a primary sense which makes communication possible. A hearing loss restricts one's ability to communicate and participate in social life, in the absence of appropriate supports.

### *The prevalence of hearing loss in New Zealand*

There are a range of estimates of the prevalence of hearing loss among the New Zealand population. The prevalence varies from 7.5% to 20.8% of the population. Explanations for variation in the estimates include:

- self-reported hearing loss bias (e.g., *2013 Disability Survey*)
- various definitions of hearing loss which can include disability, impairment, age-related effects, and occupational induced hearing loss.

The New Zealand Hearing Industry Association and the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (NZIER)<sup>1</sup> have used the hearing loss prevalence of approximately 10% (i.e., 511,671 people) from Anovum's (2018) *New Zealand Trak* for the following reasons:

- It was the most recent estimate.
- It represented a middle ground from among the quoted estimates.
- The estimate was conservative.

Given New Zealand's ageing population, the proportion of people living with hearing loss is expected to increase significantly over the next 20 years.

## **Some population groups experience greater hearing loss and a range of associated issues<sup>2</sup>**

- Potentially, half of the New Zealand prison population has a hearing loss. Poor hearing in childhood may contribute to anti-social behaviour, leading to prison.
- An estimated 60,000 children are affected by Auditory Processing Disorder (APD), that is, one child per classroom. APD affects the brain's ability to understand what is heard. APD also affects adults, particularly older people.
- Māori and Pacific peoples are over-represented in congenital hearing loss and middle ear disease. Causes of hearing loss among Māori also include noise damage (e.g., from high noise occupations).
- Given a 39.4% hearing loss prevalence among older people in both the 75-79 and 80-84 age groups (Anovum 2018), hearing aid management can be challenging for rest home residents with hearing loss.

<sup>1</sup> NZIER (June 2020), *Economic effects of hearing loss* (commissioned by NZHIA).

<sup>2</sup> See Hearing New Zealand (2020). *We can't afford not to...*

- Tinnitus (sound in the head or ears that has no external sound source) affects up to 240,000 New Zealanders. The main causes are noise-induced hearing loss and ageing.

### **Research points to a significant gap between need and access to treatment for people experiencing hearing loss**

The *New Zealand Trak* (2018) data indicates that approximately 42% of people with hearing loss (i.e., close to 215,000) have accessed hearing devices. This leaves under 300,000 people (58% approximately) living with untreated hearing loss.

Of those surveyed in *New Zealand Trak*:

- 95% of hearing aid wearers stated that their hearing aids improved their quality of life
- 64% wished they had got their hearing aid sooner.

The New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (2020) estimated that 80,723 people aged 65 and over had an unmet need for hearing aids or other mitigations in 2019.

### **There are significant barriers to accessing hearing loss supports and audiological services**

- Cost is seen by many New Zealanders as a major barrier to accessing hearing loss services. 67% of those surveyed in *New Zealand Trak* stated that they "cannot afford a hearing aid".
- The Government funds the provision of hearing aids at different amounts through various agencies and mechanisms (e.g., ACC, Ministry of Health Hearing Aid Funding Scheme, Veterans Affairs, Children's Hearing Aid Fund, Hearing Aid Subsidy Scheme). Funding availability is inequitably based on agency funding and the age of the person. The level of funding does not cover the full costs of hearing aid provision (National Foundation for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing 2016).
- Lack of public information about the available (but limited) Government support is an access issue.
- Cultural factors such as stigma attached to disability and fear of social rejection in certain communities (e.g., Pacific, Asian and African) lead to access issues. Of those surveyed in *New Zealand Trak*, only 26% said they are never made fun of because of their hearing loss.
- The lack of greater and targeted access to hearing health information and culturally responsive services for Māori with hearing loss (e.g., lack of Māori hearing professionals) are a potential breach of the Treaty of Waitangi, particularly, the focus of Article 3 on equal citizenship rights (Hearing New Zealand 2020).
- Geographic location restricts access in both remote rural areas and low socio-economic areas. In addition, there is no service prescription for what hearing services District Health Boards must provide. Services vary from district to district. Hospital audiology clinics largely restrict their adult services (Hearing New Zealand 2020).
- The Covid-19 context has intensified the impacts of hearing loss and made it more difficult for people to cope with everyday life. For example, isolation during lockdowns is a major concern for people with hearing loss who cannot, or struggle to, use the phone. In addition, physical distancing is a challenge for those relying on proximity to cope with hearing loss.



## **Hearing loss points to significant economic and social impacts on the wellbeing of New Zealanders**

### *Hearing loss reduces employment and productivity*

The New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (2020) identified three channels through which hearing loss affects labour productivity:

**Reduced employment** – People experiencing hearing loss are at higher risk of being unemployed due to challenges such as the additional difficulty in job search and self-selection out of the labour market. The probability of being employed decreased by 10% for those experiencing hearing loss.

**Absenteeism** – Workers living with hearing loss are more likely to take days off work. It has been estimated that the total economic cost associated with absenteeism in 2016 was NZ\$66.7 million.

**Presenteeism** – Workers living with hearing loss are likely to be less productive than other workers. A 3% productivity decrease due to presenteeism has been estimated for 2016.

NZIER (2020) estimated that the likely economic effects of treating hearing loss include:

- The labour productivity effects would lead to an annual GDP growth of between NZ\$556 million and NZ\$716 million.
- The economy-wide employment increases would lead to an annual GDP growth of between NZ\$294 million and NZ\$558 million
- The social benefit from increasing participation in society, by mitigating hearing loss in those over-65s, was estimated to range from NZ\$795 million to NZ\$1.4 billion, depending on the social value of participation.

### *Hearing loss is a major factor in social disengagement*

Hearing loss can make it increasingly difficult for people to participate in social activities (e.g., eating out, going to a movie or show, joining a club) and, thereby, lead to increased social isolation and loneliness.

### *Hearing loss has a negative impact on overall health*

NZIER's research indicates that hearing loss is correlated with increased use of healthcare services and a higher burden of illness in older adults, even when all other relevant factors are controlled for. The health conditions that hearing loss is associated with include:

- more frequent falls
- increased prevalence of sight loss
- increased risk of stroke
- increased risk of diabetes
- accelerated risk of cognitive decline and dementia among older adults

The *New Zealand Trak* report identified that the risks of reduced mental health (e.g., depression) and wellbeing increased substantially for people with untreated hearing loss. Reduced mental wellbeing also correlates with decreased social participation consequent upon hearing loss.

## **Various solutions to tackle unmet hearing loss needs have been put forward by organisations supporting people with hearing loss**

### *The lack of robust hearing loss data must be addressed*

There is a clear need for valid and reliable data and more research on hearing loss to better understand the best policy interventions, including:

- increasing hearing aid adoption rates
- funding the unmet need for hearing loss mitigations.
- understanding the impacts of hearing loss on children and the effects over their life-course
- understanding the impacts of hearing loss in the workplace.

It was noted that there is a clear need for better data to be reported on hearing loss by the Government. For example, the National Foundation for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (2016) could not locate any publicly available expenditure data on District Health Board hearing loss services.

The inclusion of hearing impairment questions in government surveys (e.g., New Zealand Health Survey) would be a good starting point.

### *Building public awareness of available hearing loss services and the subsidies available to access these is necessary*

This would include promotion through a range of stakeholders across the working age population and older people, concentrating on both prevention and treatment. It was noted that an increased focus on awareness raising is urgently needed by both the Ministry of Health and ACC.

### *Information needs to be accessible to people with hearing loss*

According to Hearing New Zealand (2020), research shows that 68+% of people with hearing loss rely on subtitles for television news and entertainment. However, many areas of communication, particularly live streaming, do not have subtitles. Currently, there is no compulsion to provide captions. What is required, includes:

- compulsory captioning across all media and video platforms (including streaming platforms) and advertising (particularly government advertising).
- access to software that enables live-captioned phone calls on mobile devices.

### *Initiatives to increase audiology workforce scale, flexibility and location are called for*

Various proposals have been put forward by the New Zealand Hearing Industry Association in their *Briefing* (16 November 2020) to you to build up the audiology workforce, including:

- supporting initiatives by tertiary institutions to increase the number of audiologists being trained
- putting in place mechanisms to recruit overseas qualified audiologists
- working with NZHIA and the wider audiology service sector to develop a plan that addresses geographic locations and access for at risk communities
- enabling audiology workforce flexibility such as implementing changes in ACC regulations to make it possible for audiometrists to undertake hearing tests
- ensuring legislation supports the implementation of technology advances.

*Expanding access to screening for hearing loss is needed*

This would require a whole-of-government approach to address the gap between the unmet needs of people with hearing loss and access to treatment.

In this regard, the National Foundation for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing is promoting a Public Health Programme (2021-2026) to improve the wellbeing of the Deaf and hard of hearing community.

*Reviewing government funding support for people with untreated hearing loss is called for*

Various services are available to people with hearing loss in New Zealand, including:

- screening and audiometric services
- hearing aids and cochlear implants
- access services (e.g., hearing loops and captioning)
- other specialist disability, hearing and employment services for people who are deaf and hard-of-hearing.

The provision of these services is primarily through the public health system (Ministry of Health). However, hearing aids for adults are mainly provided through private clinics.

It has been noted by organisations supporting people with hearing loss that, without a significant contribution of resources from the Government, it will not be possible to address the issues experienced by New Zealanders with untreated hearing loss.<sup>3</sup>

Author: Dr Out of scope, Advisor

Responsible manager: Brian Coffey, Director

File ref: A13378253

---

<sup>3</sup> See National Foundation for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (2016), New Zealand Hearing Industry Association (2020), New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (2020).