

Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme

Inquiry into the Provision of Hearing Services under the NDIS

Hearing 20 February 2017

Opening statement by Jason Ridgway, President and Chair of Board of Audiology Australia

I appear before you today as president of Audiology Australia. Audiology Australia thanks the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) for the opportunity to appear as a witness at this Hearing.

Audiology Australia represents 2,500 audiologists in Australia. Our members are in every state and territory of Australia, in metropolitan, rural and remote areas. This is estimated to be over 95% of all practicing audiologists in Australia. We believe that every human being has the right to communicate and interact with the world in ways that are fulfilling and meaningful to them.

I have 25 years of experience working in government and as a practitioner and my statement today represents the views of many of our members who contacted Audiology Australia with their comments about their experiences with the NDIS.

Audiologists work with clients of all ages to help them to preserve, manage and improve their hearing. Audiologists also help clients with their ability to process and understand sounds, and their balance. This includes those clients with complex needs. Audiologists must have completed at least the equivalent of an Australian university Masters-level degree in clinical audiology.

Audiology Australia plays two main roles in the hearing services sector:

Firstly, we act as **a regulator of the profession of audiology in Australia**. We offer regulation that is recognised and required by the Australian Government, including for access to funding under programs such as:

- Office of Hearing Services' Hearing Services Program;
- Medicare;
- The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA); and
- State and Territory workers' compensation schemes (such as Workcover)

Secondly, as the peak professional body in audiology, we give value to our members, whether they be Student, Full, Emeritus or Life members, by providing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) events, conferences, and professional advocacy, support and advice.

In our written response to this Inquiry, Audiology Australia submitted the following:

1. We support a **holistic assessment of the client's abilities, needs and goals** in order to determine eligibility for the NDIS, rather than restrictive, threshold-based criteria.
2. We support recognition of funding for **all permanent auditory and balance disorders** that significantly affect individuals' ability to perform tasks and participate, not just hearing loss.
3. We submit that the NDIS must fund the **full range of required rehabilitation services for hearing loss and all other eligible auditory and balance disorders**, including teleaudiology if required.
4. We support The National Aged Care Alliance's recommendations that Australian Governments ensure equitable service provision in the disability and aged care systems and that a review of the age requirements for the NDIS to determine if NDIS eligibility should be linked to the Age Pension age, as envisaged by the Productivity Commission.
5. We support the principles of choice and control, and support full contestability of hearing services for all ages following the full rollout of the NDIS in mid-2019. With full contestability we do acknowledge the very real concerns that people may have about reduction in quality of service. In particular, the potential impact on services for young children and their families. To support our members' ability to provide the highest quality services to clients, Audiology Australia is developing a "titling" program. This titling program aims to provide the assurance that members of Audiology Australia are appropriately educated, trained and experienced to provide the full range of audiological services to NDIS participants, including those who are most vulnerable.

Audiology Australia is happy that our model of self-regulation has been acknowledged as sufficient to meet the requirements to periodically verify audiologists' qualifications and expertise in the NDIS Quality and Safeguarding Framework, which was released on the 3rd of February this year. It has been suggested to us that audiology will most likely fall into the 'low risk' group of services, which will make it much easier for audiology practices to be registered as an NDIS provider. We hope that our membership with the National Alliance of Self-Regulating Health Professions will strengthen our mutual recognition arrangements with the NDIA and other Government agencies.

However, we are concerned about inconsistency of advice and decisions from NDIS planners. We are also concerned that the full range of required rehabilitation services for hearing loss and aimed at capacity building are not being considered. We are confused by discrepancies in funding provided for hearing aid and other technology. We are confused by who can provide services under the transition arrangements.

Audiology Australia has not been consulted in the design of NDIS hearing services, including reference packages. We are therefore very grateful to have the opportunity to witness today and discuss how we can contribute to improving the NDIS for participants:

1. We want to contribute to the drafting of the NDIS eligibility criteria for people with auditory and balance disorders;
2. We want to develop information training sessions for audiologists when the eligibility criteria are determined;
3. We want to work together with the DSS and NDIA to ensure that the costs of hearing devices and audiological services are transparent, and;
4. We want to develop information and training for audiologists regarding who can provide services under the NDIS, both during the transition phase and after full rollout in mid-2019.

Audiology Australia hopes that working collaboratively with the NDIS will help address the misinformation and confusion among our members regarding the transition arrangements for hearing services to the NDIS. The current confusion is not only limiting participants' choice and control, but also seems to be disadvantaging some of our members.

Once again, Audiology Australia thanks the committee for the opportunity to speak today, and our members remain hopeful that the NDIS will offer lifelong support for all Australians with auditory and balance disorders who need that support.