

Hearing health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

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Hearing loss among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and especially children and young people is widespread and much more common than for non-Indigenous Australians. Communities in parts of Australia have rates of chronic middle ear disease (otitis media) that are classified by the World Health Organization as an urgent public health problem.

Good hearing and ear health (hearing health) is crucial to achieving positive educational, social and health outcomes. Hearing loss, especially in childhood, can lead to linguistic, social and learning difficulties and behavioural problems in school. Such difficulties may reduce educational achievements and have lifelong consequences for wellbeing, employment, income and social success, while potentially increasing adverse contact with the criminal justice system. Otitis media is also associated with social determinants of health, including poverty and crowded housing conditions.

While there is evidence of effective hearing services and programs, Audiology Australia is concerned that health initiatives over the past two decades that were intended to reduce the unacceptably high incidence of ear disease and hearing disability among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have not had a substantially significant impact across Australia. Through its position statement, Audiology Australia makes recommendations about how this national crisis can be addressed.

Audiology Australia recommends that Australian Governments:

- **Support the development of a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander framework for hearing health under Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership**
- **Commit long term funding to support and expand the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce who are trained to coordinate and deliver hearing health programs**
- **Facilitate the upskilling of other health professionals in the prevention, detection and management of ear disease and hearing loss**
- **Amend the Medical Benefits Scheme to enable audiologists to bill Medicare directly and to provide for an increased number of audiological services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples**
- **Enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers in all jurisdictions to possess, supply and administer antibiotics for hearing health conditions consistent with the current NT model of care**
- **Develop a national implementation plan for effective strategies that prevent otitis media and prevent the long-term consequences of hearing loss in those aged 0-5 years**
- **Establish a minimum set of primary care hearing health check points for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-5 years**
- **Provide funding for:**
 - **soundfield amplification systems and acoustic standards for educational settings in all school classrooms – especially in rural and remote Australia**
 - **professional development of teachers in hearing loss, hearing health care and how to manage this within the classroom environment**
- **Ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples currently incarcerated, entering custody, on remand or under sentence should undergo a hearing assessment and be supplied with treatment and/or hearing rehabilitation as needed.**