



## Most Indigenous Children in Remote Areas are at Risk of Hearing Loss. This Project aims to Change It.

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## Distinguished Community Service

Deafness Forum Australia has announced its three new Honorary Life Members. The award is for excellent voluntary contributions to the community over a great period of time that stand out from others who may have also made valuable contributions.



## Science is Making it Possible to Hear Nature

Scientists have recently made some remarkable discoveries about non-human sounds. With the aid of digital bioacoustics – tiny, portable digital recorders similar to those found in your smartphone – researchers are documenting the universal importance of sound to life on Earth. But this raises ethical and philosophical questions. Do we have the right to eavesdrop on non-humans and gather data without their consent?



## Social and Emotional Impacts of Hearing Loss

“While whilst we know that hearing loss can affect some aspects of social and emotional wellbeing, there was little in place to help audiologists support their patients with these matters.”

# The Injustice of Impairment within the Aboriginal Community

By Dr John Byrne AM, Commissioner for the Equal Opportunity Commission Western Australia and a member of Deafness Forum Australia.



The Closing the Gap initiative sets targets for reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and adults in the criminal justice system.

What is not widely recognised is to achieve the targets we will need to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in prison who have an impairment.

It is important to do this because many impairments can bring people to the attention of the justice system and affect their ability to communicate with it. The justice system in Australia does not systematically collect statistics about Aboriginal prisoners. Although some statistics are available, improvements to the collection of statistics are essential to inform Closing the Gap initiatives. An Australian Law Reform Commission report, [Pathways to Justice - Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People](#) published on 28 March 2018 stated:

Hearing impairment among adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners is estimated to be extremely high--affecting between 80 to 95% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners. This can result in communication difficulties when engaged with the criminal justice system, particularly where English is a second or third language.

Using the lower figure of 80%, an Aboriginal person with a hearing impairment is over five times more likely to be in prison than an Aboriginal person who does not have a hearing impairment. A high proportion of Aboriginal children in detention also have foetal alcohol syndrome.

Other impairments that can affect interaction and communication with the justice system are autism, mental health issues, and cognitive impairments.

Some of these impairments are preventable and should be better targeted through public health promotions such as foetal alcohol.

Others are treatable, for example otitis media, the major cause of hearing loss in Aboriginal people.

Culturally appropriate prevention and treatment programs to reduce impairment in Aboriginal children are required to help achieve the Closing the Gap targets.

Many of the impairments that affect communication may not be immediately apparent to a police officer, duty solicitor, magistrate, judge, or prison officer.

This can result in miscommunication, which may be compounded because many people who have a communication difficulty are either unaware of it or try to conceal it by agreeing with anything put to them.

Deafness Forum, the peak national organisation, recently produced a paper [Closing the Gap: Addressing the hearing health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the criminal justice system](#) that addresses the issues and solutions for people with a hearing impairment in the criminal justice system.

One recommendation is provision of a hearing assessment prior to a person's court appearance. In the meantime, all involved in the justice system need to be aware of the high proportion of Aboriginal people in the justice system who have an impairment that affects their communication.

One way to address this is for the presiding officer to ask the defendant to repeat the charge after it has been read out.

This measure would reveal whether the charge has been adequately communicated. If a communication difficulty is detected, professional communication assistance should be obtained.

## Most Indigenous Children in Remote Areas are at Risk of Hearing Loss. This Project aims to Change It.



Audiometrist Margaret Murray with her niece, Tegan. Credit: Macquarie University

Newly-graduated Indigenous audiometrists are heading home to the bush, to help tackle a 'shameful crisis' of hearing loss. It's estimated that in some remote communities, up to 90 per cent of children are affected.

Margaret Murray is an Aboriginal Health Worker living in the NSW-Victorian border town of Albury, who knows firsthand about the devastating impacts of hearing infections.

“As a child growing up near Mildura [in northern Victoria] I had a perforated ear,” the Maraura Barkindji woman says.

“Dad had to take me to the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne for surgery. I was lucky to be left with scarring but no permanent hearing loss. But a lot of other children with perforated ears grow up to need hearing aids.”

Margaret Murray is 53 and recently graduated with a Diploma in Audiometry. She was among 15 Aboriginal students from remote communities to take part in a ground-breaking hearing project at Sydney's Macquarie University, in partnership with TAFE NSW.

“It means the world to me with to raise awareness of hearing loss in my community, and help to prevent it by letting people know about the importance of hearing tests,” says Cara Cross, a research fellow with the Aboriginal Children's Hearing Health Project, run by Macquarie University.

"It is amazing to see Ms Murray working with Hearing Australia and helping others,".

Experts say childhood hearing loss may be as high as 90 per cent in some remote communities, most often caused by common middle ear infections.

Left untreated, Ms Cross says ear infections can have long-term impacts.

“If a child can't hear their family and their kin talking, then they won't be able to pick up speech correctly so this can lead to a disability,” says Cara Cross.

“Many children have speech issues, and literacy issues, which can flow into a lack of being able to find suitable employment. So, it can actually flow on into their adult life and cause quite significant issues.”

Eileen Byers is among the audiometry graduates. She grew up on a mission near Casino, in northern NSW, and hopes to improve outcomes for children in her community.



New audiometrist Eileen Byers from Casino, NSW. Credit: SBS / Sandra Fulloon

"There are a fair few children who would have hearing loss in the Northern Rivers," says Ms Byers, an Aboriginal Health Worker.

"It is a really big step to be able to come out of my comfort zone and do something like this to help the community."

"There can be a lot of fear for Aboriginal mothers, particularly in identifying that their children are having health problems given the issues of the past where children would be taken away," says Cara Cross.

"The whole idea of going to a doctor and identifying that your child may be having a health issue can be quite scary. So, for Aboriginal mothers, knowing that they are going into a place that's culturally safe allows them to relax and get their child treated without having the fears in the back of their mind."

It is hoped newly-graduated Indigenous audiometrists will boost testing levels in their communities, leading to earlier treatment and better outcomes for those with hearing loss, says Catherine McMahon, Professor of Audiology at Macquarie University.

"For Aboriginal people, particularly Aboriginal children, there's an incredibly high prevalence of middle ear disease and of hearing loss.

"If we are able to detect a problem early then we can mitigate all the long-term effects that middle ear disease and hearing loss can have in kids."

Professor McMahon says the culturally safe approach to hearing tests may soon be adapted for other high-risk groups.



Professor Catherine McMahon from Macquarie University. Credit: SBS / Sandra Fulloon

"Disadvantaged children and families from refugee or migrant backgrounds are also vulnerable to middle ear disease and hearing loss.

"That is why it is really important that we have targeted screening programs in all schools."

## Distinguished Community Service

Deafness Forum Australia has announced its three new Honorary Life Members.

The presentations were made at a ceremony during the recent Hearing Australia 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference in Sydney. (Our sincere thanks to its Chair and Managing Director for providing this opportunity).

Honorary Life membership of Deafness Forum recognises the actions and achievements of people who go above and beyond what could be reasonably expected.

The award is for excellent voluntary contributions to the community over a great period of time that stand out from others who may have also made valuable contributions.



Awards presenter Trent Zimmerman (at left) with Barry MacKinnon, Ann Porter and Margaret Dewberry.

### **Hon. Life Member, Ann Porter (NSW)**

Ann Porter was awarded an Order of Australia in 2013 for her significant service in executive and advocacy roles for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

She founded and managed Aussie Deaf Kids since 2007, a charity which aims to empower parents raising a child with hearing loss through online support, information and advocacy.

She is a Member of the Australasian Newborn Hearing Screening Committee and a founding member of the Global Coalition of Parents of Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

Ann is a strong supporter, friend and ally of the deaf and hard of hearing community and believes in unbiased information for families.

## Hon. Life Member, Barry MacKinnon (WA)

Barry MacKinnon has been actively working on behalf of Deaf and Hearing Impaired people for more than 30 years. He was a key figure in the establishment of 'Parents United to Support Hearing Impaired Children'. He was until recently the President of the Deafness Council, and also a chair of the state's Disability Services Commission.

For six years he was leader of the West Australia Liberal Party and Leader of the Opposition between 1986 and 1992. In 1997 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to people with hearing impairment. He also received a Centenary Medal in 2001.

Barry continues to provide advice, guidance, and policy suggestions to various Deafness Forum policy papers and positions presented to the Commonwealth Government.

"This award recognises the work that many people in Western Australia have put in over many years, to advance the interests of people who are Deaf or hard of hearing - work that we will continue to do," Barry said.

## Hon. Life Member, Margaret Dewberry (NSW)

It is difficult to overstate how valuable Margaret Dewberry's contribution has been to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. She has a strong sense of social justice and an unparalleled knowledge of both the hearing needs of individuals and the system that supports them.

Most of her career was with Hearing Australia as a clinician, manager and finally Executive Manager of the Community Service Obligations Program, as well as Executive Manager for Indigenous and Multicultural Services, Government Relations and Corporate Governance.

Since her retirement, Margaret has devoted countless hours to assisting Deafness Forum and its Working Groups with report writing and submissions. Her counsel is widely sought after by many in the Hearing Health Sector as well as Commonwealth Governments.

"I feel honoured and humbled to receive this award. It has been an absolute privilege to contribute to the great work that is done by the dedicated people in consumer organisations," Margaret said.

**The awards' presentation was made by Trent Zimmerman**, former member of the Australian Parliament, and a staunch advocate for a 'fair go' for people with hearing challenges and for the organisations that support them. He chaired an exhaustive national inquiry in 2017 into the Hearing Health and Wellbeing of Australia.



## New Deafness Forum board appointed

At the recent Annual General Meeting, the board of directors for the next year was [announced](#). The new board will meet before the end of the month to elect its office-bearers, including its chair.



75 years  
1947 - 2022



# Hearing the future

## Hearing the future conference and gala dinner

Hearing Australia and National Acoustic Laboratories marked their 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a special conference and gala dinner in Sydney last month.



For 75 years Hearing Australia and the National Acoustic Laboratories (NAL) have worked with government, universities, commercial and not-for profit organisations to provide world leading research and clinical services to help children and adults with hearing loss.



## Greg Leigh awarded inaugural Hearing Australia Lifetime Achievement Award

Professor Greg Leigh has served on several Australian Government committees including the New South Wales Ministerial Standing Committee on Hearing and the National Neonatal Hearing Screening Working Party.

He is currently chairman of the Australasian Newborn Hearing Screening Committee. He is a former National President of the Education Commission for the World Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf and Chair of the International Steering Committees of both the Asia-Pacific Congress on Deafness and the International Congress on Education of the Deaf.



In 2001 he was made a Fellow of the Australian College of Educators and in 2014 he was invested as an Officer in the Order of Australia.

Greg Leigh is the Director of NextSense Institute, a centre for research and professional education in affiliation with Macquarie University.

He was presented with his award at the Hearing Australia 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner.



**Now is the time to join Deafness Forum Australia** to support our advocacy in 2023.

We are Australia's Hearing Health Consumer peak body and also the national Disability Representative peak.

On your behalf, we are in a uniquely influential position to advise the Government on holistic health, disability and accessibility.

But we are so much better with you involved. Join us. Become a Member.

You can download a Membership application form [here](#).

# Science is Making it Possible to Hear Nature

Karen Bakker is writing for [The Guardian](#)



Mother bats babble to their babies in 'motherese'.

Scientists have recently made some remarkable discoveries about non-human sounds. With the aid of digital bioacoustics – tiny, portable digital recorders similar to those found in your smartphone – researchers are documenting the universal importance of sound to life on Earth.

By placing these digital microphones all over Earth, from the depths of the ocean to the Arctic and the Amazon, scientists are discovering the hidden sounds of nature, many of which occur at ultrasonic or infrasonic frequencies, above or below human hearing range. Digital bioacoustics helps us hear these sounds, by functioning as a planetary-scale hearing aid and enabling humans to record nature's sounds beyond the limits of our sensory capacities. With the help of artificial intelligence (AI), researchers are now decoding complex communication in other species.

Many species that we once thought to be mute actually make noise – lots of it, in some cases. For example, research at Brazil's [Wildlife](#) Conservation Society has demonstrated that Amazonian sea turtles make more than 200 distinct sounds. Research showed that turtle hatchlings even make sounds while still in their eggs to coordinate the moment of their birth. Research also revealed that mother turtles wait nearby in the river, calling to their babies to guide them to safety: the first scientific evidence of parental care in turtles, which were thought to simply abandon their eggs.

Scientists are also learning that vocally active species – like bats – make sounds which contain much more complex information than previously thought. By recording many hours of bat vocalisations and decoding them using AI algorithms, scientists found that bats remember favours and hold grudges; socially distance and go quiet when ill; and use vocal labels that reveal individual and kin identity. Male bats learn territorial songs in specific dialects from their fathers and, much like birds, sing these songs to defend territory and attract mates, which scientists characterise as culture.

Scientists are now attempting to use these digitally enabled discoveries to develop tools for interspecies communication with creatures as diverse as honeybees and whales, raising both ethical and philosophical questions. Do we have the right to eavesdrop on non-humans and gather data without their consent? Does the existence of complex communication in animals challenge the claim that humans, alone, possess language? What are the risks of engaging other species in AI-mediated conversations, when we know about the biases embedded in AI systems?

## School for hearing and speech-impaired kids cries out for funds



Hearing and speech-impaired children in Jammu and Kashmir (India) are a neglected lot, with the only school for them facing a funds crisis and lacking hostel and transportation facilities.

The school is run by Jammu and Kashmir Samaj Kalyan Kendra, an NGO, with the help of social workers. While speech and hearing-impaired children in the Union Territory are in their thousands, it isn't possible for all of them to enrol at the school as it doesn't have a hostel.

The school currently has students representing 10 districts of the UT and many are forced to take rooms on rent at rates.

The majority of students are from remote areas of Doda, Kishtwar, Ramban, Rajouri, Poonch, Anantnag and Kupwara districts.

It was alleged that the school has not received any help from the J&K administration and has to pay Rs 30,000 to Rs 35,000 as rent (on a room basis) per year for the building housing the institution.

Using sign language, students told ANI that while the school doesn't have a hostel for students coming from remote corners, there is also no transportation for them.

"I leave for school at eight in the morning and reach home at six in the evening. I face a lot of difficulty on the way as no one understands sign language," a student said.

The students demanded that the school authorities make a hostel and transportation available for them at the earliest.

The school administration said it is woefully short of funds to run the institution and even struggles to pay wages to teachers.

These children also need to undergo other vocational courses so that they can earn a living.

Since October 1980, the NGO has been working for the education of specially abled children, especially girls who can't listen or speak.

Its founder president was renowned social activist Dr RR Khajuria.

# Understanding and Addressing the Social and Emotional Impacts of Hearing Loss

By Bec Bennett, Ear Science Institute Australia

Two and a half years ago, the Raine Medical Research Foundation funded me to work on a project helping audiologists to better support the social and emotional needs of adults with hearing loss.

This project was undertaken because whilst we know that hearing loss can affect some aspects of social and emotional wellbeing, there was little in place to help audiologists support their patients with these matters.



I'd like to share with you some of the details of the project, and what was achieved. This project comprised three parts.

**Part One – Understanding the “Problem”:** We conducted interviews with adults with hearing loss, their significant others and some audiologists.

These were to better understand (i) how hearing loss can affect social and emotional wellbeing, and (ii) what is currently done to support the social and emotional wellbeing needs of adults with hearing loss.

We learnt that:

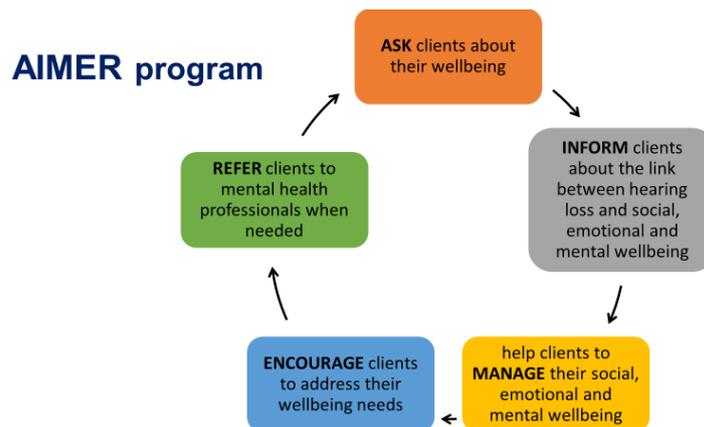
The emotional impacts of hearing loss can be far reaching and they can include feelings of distress, frustration, embarrassment, inferiority, shame, rejection, and loneliness, other feelings.

- While some people develop ways to cope with these feelings, many said that their ways were not effective.
- Many adults who experience these feeling not only want, but expect their audiologist to discuss and provide support in the context of their hearing loss and rehabilitation.
- Audiologists have positive views towards supporting their patients in managing these things, and wish to broaden their skills set.

**Part Two – Developing a “Solution”:** We set out to develop a training program and clinical tools to assist audiologists with the confidence and ability to provide social and emotional well-being support alongside the care they provide for hearing loss.

We used a systematic approach called the Behaviour Change Wheel (BCW), an eight-step process designed to develop interventions to change behaviour.

We called the program the AIMER, which stands for Ask, Inform, Manage, Encourage, Refer. The next diagram summarises what each step entails.



The AIMER program included:

- Training to improve knowledge, how to communicate and discuss these issues, and when and where to refer patient to for further help.
- Resources that can be used by the audiologist and the patient in the clinic or to take home.
- Changes that can be made in the clinic, for example to prompt the audiologist ask about mental wellbeing, and using a survey to assess mental wellbeing.

**Part Three – Testing it in the “Real-world”:** The AIMER program was then rolled out at the Lions Hearing Clinics. Between October 2020 and February 2022 we trained the staff, and then measured and observed things like how often social and emotional wellbeing was raised in appointments, and how often patients were referred to other specialists.

We found that the AIMER program was effective in changing the behaviour of audiologists. They asked their patients more about their social and emotional wellbeing, they provided more relevant information, and provided more support.

This is the first of its kind in the world. We have published our results in leading international medical journals and shared the findings at national and international conferences. We believe that this work will encourage clinics across Australia and indeed in other countries to use AIMER, adapting it to suit their own needs. We produced a couple of videos that told patient stories of how hearing loss can affect social and emotional wellbeing. You can view these by clicking on these links:

[Hearing loss affects us all in different ways](#)

[Ways of coping with hearing loss](#)

We couldn't have done it without the help of people with real life experience of hearing loss, guiding our work and participating in our studies – thank you.

Where to next? I was just recently awarded a competitive Government grant (2022 NHMRC Investigator award) for a project that will develop a digital tool for adults with hearing loss to help them learn about the social and emotional impacts of hearing loss. You will find more information on this next project [here](#). So, watch this space!

## Cochlear's Ambitions are Raising Eyebrows

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has significant concerns with Cochlear's proposed acquisition of Demant's hearing implants business, Oticon Medical.

Cochlear and Oticon Medical manufacture and supply non-surgical bone conduction devices, surgical bone anchored devices, and cochlear implant hearing devices. These devices are used to treat more advanced hearing loss that typically cannot be managed by hearing aids.

There are few suppliers of these devices globally. In Australia, Cochlear and Oticon Medical are two of only three suppliers of non-surgical bone conduction and bone anchored devices, and two of only four suppliers of cochlear implants.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) is concerned the proposed acquisition would substantially lessen competition in already highly concentrated markets, which may lead to higher prices, reduced service levels and reduced innovation.

"Cochlear is by far the largest supplier of surgical bone anchored devices and cochlear implants in Australia. It is also an important supplier of non-surgical bone conduction devices," ACCC Chair Gina Cass-Gottlieb said.

"Although Oticon Medical has a much smaller presence in Australia, we have significant concerns that the proposed acquisition will remove one of Cochlear's few competitors in the supply of these three types of hearing devices in Australia."

"These devices are critically important in providing choice to consumers with hearing loss about the way they manage their hearing needs," Ms Cass-Gottlieb said.

"Market feedback has indicated that demand for these devices is likely to increase and so it is important to ensure acquisitions in this market do not lead to higher prices or reduced innovation over time."

The ACCC is also concerned about the impact of the proposed acquisition on incentives to innovate.

Decisions to invest in innovation take into account a range of factors at the global level. If incentives to innovate are reduced with the removal of competition from Oticon Medical, it will have a significant negative impact on Australian consumers.

The ACCC is also considering the likelihood of other suppliers of non-surgical bone conduction devices, surgical bone anchored devices and cochlear implants entering or expanding in Australia.

"Market feedback indicates brand awareness is important to the clinicians and surgeons that recommend these devices to Australian patients. In addition to significant technical and regulatory barriers, new entrants would need to overcome clinicians' reluctance to switch to new or unknown providers," Ms Cass-Gottlieb said.

The ACCC is inviting feedback on the statement of issues by 22 December.

Further information is available on the ACCC's public register here: [Cochlear Limited proposes to acquire Oticon Medical](#)

## The Cost of Health

The [latest national data on health expenditure](#) shows that total spending for 2020-21 was another record year, reports health policy analyst Charles Maskell-Knight.

No-one should be surprised by this, he adds, as an expanding and ageing population means that “every year of health spending should be a record.”

Compared with 2018-19, total health spending in 2020-21 had increased by 8.6 percent in real terms. This was almost all due to increased government expenditure (+12.3 per cent), while private sector expenditure increased by only 0.7 per cent.

In relation to public hospitals, private patient revenue declined by almost 15 percent between 2018-19 and 2020-21, reflecting the decline in elective surgery.

Among many trends noted, Maskell-Knight observes that private health insurance funds increased expenditure on administration by 9.5 percent, and says “private health insurance must be the only part of the financial sector characterised by decreasing efficiency”.



Total spending on GP services increased by 4.8 percent over the two years. However, this masks an increase in Commonwealth spending of almost seven percent, offset by a reduction in individual payments of nearly 10 percent. This clearly reflects the widespread utilisation of bulk-billed telehealth consultations.

Commonwealth expenditure on referred medical services (including pathology and diagnostic imaging, as well as specialist consultations and private patient in-hospital services) increased by 12.2 percent over the two years, presumably due to the costs of COVID-19 testing.

However, individual payments in the form of co-payments increased by nine percent. As the COVID-19 items were required to be bulk-billed, the increased individual contributions must relate to other specialist services.

In relation to non-medical services, total expenditure on dental care grew by only two percent over the two years.

However, expenditure on other health services (physiotherapy, psychology, optometry, **audiology**, and other allied health) fell by over five percent. Many of these services are difficult to provide through telehealth, and the lockdowns clearly led to many appointments being deferred or cancelled.

From [Croakey Health Media](#)



## Nurturing careers for those with caring natures.

The Carer Career Guidance Project can help unpaid female carers enter the workforce by providing subsidised training that matches interests and skills.

This service is free for a limited time: [www.tafensw.edu.au/carers-to-career](http://www.tafensw.edu.au/carers-to-career)

## Know someone who deserves their own copy of One in Six?

Drop us a line to [hello@deafnessforum.org.au](mailto:hello@deafnessforum.org.au)

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