

DEAF TO INDIGENOUS CHILDREN'S NEEDS

Better hearing would make a big difference to the lives of Indigenous Australians, writes **David Cornish**

Imagine learning to read and write in a foreign language. Now, imagine doing that with an ear disease. That is the challenge for tens of thousands of Indigenous children, particularly in outback Australia, according to a recent federal Senate inquiry into Indigenous ear health. These children struggle to learn effectively, and can get frustrated and disengaged. The inquiry was told that unless ways are found to help them hear, many will end up in prison.

Witnesses to the 2010 inquiry testified that more than half of all Indigenous adults have some degree of hearing loss. Viral infections in infancy cause a condition known as otitis media ('glue ear') where fluid builds up behind the ear drum, sometimes to the point of bursting. Very high numbers of children in remote communities have damaged ears; a teacher in a bush school found that 90% of her Indigenous students had no eardrums.

There is strong evidence that childhood ear infections contribute to education failure and adult imprisonment. One study found that almost half the female Indigenous inmates at a WA prison had significant hearing loss, almost 10 times higher than the non-Indigenous inmates. The percentage of adult Aborigines in Darwin Correctional Centre with a hearing impairment is around 90%.

Otitis media attacks Indigenous infants within weeks of birth and affects the development of speech. If untreated, it can lead to permanent hearing loss. The average Indigenous child suffers middle ear infections for two and a half years, compared to three months for a non-Indigenous child.

For Indigenous children who begin school with delayed oral skills, fluctuating hearing is a serious handicap. Learning the phonetics and grammar of a second language involves students repeating what the teacher says. If they don't have the best hearing, and the classroom is crowded and noisy, it can be very difficult to follow what the teacher is saying. Christine Nicholls, former principal of Lajamanu School in the Northern Territory, found that because 95% of the students had otitis media, it was 'virtually impossible' for them to learn effectively in a foreign language.

Says Adelaide audiologist Judith Coswell:

If you can't hear, you may do two things—you may daydream in the corner, because your thoughts are going to be more interesting than whatever the teacher is rabbiting on about, or you are going to act up and poke and prod your friends so they can't learn either.

Indigenous children with hearing problems can feel isolated and 'stupid' in school, and they are more likely to have behavioural problems. They generally drop out of school earlier,

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increasing their risk of being arrested and imprisoned.

Research submitted at the Senate inquiry demonstrated a 'strong correlation' between poor language skills at two years of age and criminal charges in adolescence.

Indigenous Australians suffer the highest rate of otitis media in the developed world because of poverty. Respiratory illnesses thrive when housing is overcrowded, and it is hard to get clean water and nutritious food. Professor Peter Morris, a witness at the inquiry, compared outback townships with the slums of Melbourne in the last century, when it was common for children to have runny noses and ears, and chronic wet coughs.

Governments do have a range of policy initiatives to combat ear infections. Kathy Currie, head of the Hearing Health Program in the Northern Territory, says it is now policy to check the eardrums of all Indigenous children every time they visit a health clinic for bulges, which signal a build-up of liquid. Detecting the condition before it causes a perforation is very effective in preventing hearing loss. The federal government has increased funding for the surgical repair of torn ear drums, which can in some cases restore some hearing, and are typically done after the age of seven, when children are less prone to respiratory illnesses. Promising early results from a small study in Western Australia indicate the benefits of using salt water in swimming pools to reduce rates of ear infection.

Nevertheless, witnesses at the inquiry pointed out the problems with treating ear health in isolation from the reality of people's lives, and argued that greater involvement and empowerment of Indigenous people was necessary. Many spoke of the need to educate and engage families. The parents of a child with middle ear infection might themselves have hearing loss and minimal English, and presume that their child's condition was 'normal.' Parents don't always get their children to a health clinic until the ears have burst. Some Indigenous languages don't have words for the different parts of the ear, making explanation by health officers difficult to understand. Families also

don't always have basic necessities, such as a car to get to an appointment or a fridge for storing antibiotics.

A multi-pronged and 'holistic' approach that addresses all areas of Indigenous disadvantage was widely deemed necessary to sharply reduce ear infection rates.

The Senate inquiry recommended schools change the way they teach Indigenous children with hearing problems. The inquiry advised supplying sound field amplification systems to all classrooms with a large number of Indigenous students. A Queensland study found that classroom performance improved by a quarter, equal to an extra semester a year, when teachers used a microphone. One teacher said her students stopped watching her lips and started reading the page.

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Children can get hearing aids for free from government, but sound systems must be purchased by schools as they are not covered. The current policy seems impractical because, as one Alice Springs-based audiologist told the inquiry, installing a sound field system for a classroom is cheaper (and less stigmatising) than providing hearing aids for four students.

The inquiry recommended that the government improve classroom acoustics in existing schools, which often lack the funds, say, to replace a noisy air conditioner.

Training teachers in effective teaching strategies for hearing impaired students was also identified as crucial. NT psychologist Dr Damien Howard, who has examined the effects of hearing impairment for more than 20 years, described in his submission how one teacher's attitude to a student changed considerably after the being instructed on strategies such as visual cues and repetition. The student's behavioural problems dropped by two-thirds, and the teacher commented that she no longer disliked him on account of his disruptive behaviour, which she now

understood stemmed from his disability. Yet, according to Dr Howard, just half an hour is spent on hearing loss in the two-week induction program for new teachers in the Northern Territory.

The Senate committee also recommended that police, courts and prisons provide more support for the hearing impaired. In her evidence to the inquiry, an audiologist cited an Indigenous man convicted of murder who was later found to be clinically deaf. His condition had not been noticed by the police or the court even though the suspect had gone through proceedings using the only two English words he knew—'yes' and 'good.'

The inquiry heard that Indigenous people with less severe hearing loss might struggle to defend themselves due to background noises, cultural differences, and the perceptions of non-Indigenous staff. The detached demeanour of many Indigenous people in court—as one judge put it, 'always staring out of the window, or mumbling inarticulate replies'—is often interpreted as indicative of guilt or contempt without the potential role of hearing loss being considered.

To better themselves, Indigenous children must be able to hear.

Unlike blindness, hearing impairment is not obvious. As a child, Indigenous West Australian teacher Elaine Cox never knew that she had a hearing disability, and nor did her teacher or her family, who would complain she never 'listened.'

An Indigenous health worker said knowing about his hearing loss helped him realise that he was not as dumb as he thought. As he said, 'I can do things if explained the right way.' A Queensland doctor commented on how Indigenous patients asked far more questions after he installed a sound system in his clinic.

But it can be a challenge to convince people about hearing loss. Nicholls says some teachers in Lajamanu School ignored the microphones she provided as they believed, wrongly, that the students could hear them if they just spoke

louder. She blames this attitude on a 'failure of imagination.'

Psychologist Damien Howard urges the government to adopt a 'grandmother's overview' to the problem. In Howard's opinion, efforts to tackle hearing loss have been ad hoc and haphazard rather than coordinated and sustained. Failing to help children hear means more pressure on government: it takes \$100,000 a year to keep a prisoner behind bars.

The NT Education Department testified at the inquiry that it employed just five workers to assist hearing impaired students across the territory, and that staff numbers had been recently cut after budgetary reductions.

It might need imagination to see that the child daydreaming in the classroom could be so much more. An Indigenous elder, quoted by Howard in his submission, called for more vision from government:

Imagine the world for the child without good hearing. Without good hearing the child is ignored. Without good hearing the child is scared, frustrated and angry. And without good hearing everyday would be full of noise with no chance to listen.

Now let's imagine the world with good hearing. In a world with good hearing people would be able to better themselves. In a world with good hearing there would be nobody left embarrassed and shamed in the classroom, a community would be full of pride and respect. In a world with good hearing there would be only a few black people in jail. In a world with good hearing there would be understanding.

To better themselves, Indigenous children must be able to hear, for which we need to find more effective and better funded programs. A prompt government response to the Senate inquiry will represent a step towards realising a 'world with good hearing.'