



## **Better Hearing Australia National Conference**

20 September 2003

*The Way Ahead*  
– *Exploring Directions for Better Hearing Australia*

By the Hon David K Malcolm AC CitWA  
Chief Justice of Western Australia

Mercure Hotel  
Perth, Western Australia



*Mr Ted Drowley, Better Hearing Australia National President*

*National Vice Presidents*

*Members of the BHA National Council*

*Better Hearing Australia Branch Presidents*

*Mr Barry MacKinnon, Chairperson, Disability Services Commission and*

*Better Hearing Australia (WA) Inc. Patron*

*Dr Harry Blackmore, BHA (WA) Inc. Patron*

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour for me to open the 57<sup>th</sup> Annual Better Hearing National Conference today held here in Perth. And I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the Nyungar People as the traditional owners of this land.

The theme for this year's national conference is The Way Ahead and exploring future directions for Better Hearing Australia. As well as looking at The Way Ahead I would also like to acknowledge the role that Better Hearing Australia currently plays. The organisation traces its beginnings to 1932, in Victoria, and now Better Hearing Australia has 19 branches, located in the principal cities of Australia, with over 100 venues in city, suburban and country areas. Better Hearing Australia is a non-profit, self-help organisation controlled by its members and provides an Australia-wide community support service of rehabilitation and help for Australia's hearing impaired.



Better Hearing Australia encourages the preservation of hearing of all people. It also encourages the use of preventative measures to lower the prevalence of deafness and hearing impairment, for example, by encouraging everyone to have regular audiometric tests. It also improves the communication of hearing impaired people, their families and friends by providing assistance, information and training services to many thousands of Australians. Better Hearing Australia also promotes and encourages research and participates in surveys to discover causes and extent of hearing loss in the Australian community.

The need for Better Hearing Australia appears to be on the increase. Over 2 million adults and children in Australia currently suffer from hearing disabilities. With rising noise levels in everyday life, and the aging of the population, the number of people with hearing loss is predicted to continue to rise. 1 in 5 Australians suffer from hearing loss and this figure rises to 1 in 3 of those over 65 years of age.

This is of major concern as hearing plays such an important role in our ability to communicate with others. And Communication is so central to our identity as human beings - for all of us as individuals, and as members of communities. Hearing plays an important role in our ability to communicate with others. For persons that do not hear well, it may become difficult to attend social activities and speak with friends and loved ones. And this is why organisations, such as, Better Hearing Australia are so vital.

One thing does appear clear regarding Better Hearing Australia's way ahead and that is, it is in for exciting times.



In relation to the law, the *Disability Discrimination Act* celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. This Act has further expanded the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission's legislative responsibilities, with the objectives of eliminating discrimination against people with disabilities and promoting community acceptance of the principle that people with disabilities have the same fundamental rights as all members of the community.

You may ask what has the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission done for me lately. Well I am pleased to report the Commission is working diligently on many issues for you, including in relation to section 55 of the *Disability Discrimination Act* regarding the provision of captioning. The Commission is currently conducting an enquiry into captioning of free-to-air television networks. In 2002, 47% of free-to-air broadcasts between 6.00am and midnight were captioned and the proposal tabled by the television networks would mean an increase in the captioned percentage of these broadcasts to 55% by the end of 2005 and 70% by the end of 2007.

The Commission has also commenced a major project concerning access to telecommunications systems for people with a disability. Accessible telecommunications is obviously an area of immense significance for economic and social participation, but also one in which discrimination can have a very serious impact on such participation. Exciting new developments of many new types of services which include mobile phones, and SMS (short message service) and wireless access to the internet have lead to new areas of interest for the Commission. For example, the Commission is concerned that while SMS is extremely useful



for people with a hearing impairment, in order to obtain the level of service they require, people have to pay for voice services that they can't use. Consequently, the Commission is currently reviewing disability and telecommunications access issues.

In addition, the Commission has recently received representative complaints from the Deafness Forum of Australia against 5 hotels in Sydney on behalf of 8 people who are hearing impaired or deaf. The Deafness Forum is hoping that the action taken with the Commission will lead to most hotel and other short-term accommodation operators throughout Australia recognising and responding positively to the hearing access needs.

And staying with the theme of justice, I am pleased to report that in an Australian first, the Western Australian Police Service in June this year launched "SMS Assist", a text messaging service for people with a communications disability. Research has shown that many people who are hearing impaired use SMS to contact family and friends. As the level of phone ownership is so high, the Police Service has seen this as an excellent opportunity to provide access to non-emergency police services via SMS. SMS Assist works by eligible users texting police. The police then respond with an automated reply "Message received by police – please stand by....." Police will then send another message detailing the action to be taken.

There are also exciting new developments in the medical field. For example, the Lions Ear and Hearing Institute, which opened in October 2001, is now involved in bilateral cochlear implants, brain stem implantation and complex ear surgery, as well as research projects



involving telemedicine, tissue engineering and virtual reality surgery. Cochlear implants alone have delivered hearing worldwide to more than 46,000 children and adults. I understand you will be hearing more about these exciting medical developments from Dr Marcus Atlas this afternoon.

In relation to indigenous hearing health, although studies have found rates of hearing loss of up to 70%, the good news is that the problem has been uncovered and programs have been developed. For example, the cause of recurrent ear infections in Aboriginal children has been discovered, that is bacterial biofilm. This exciting discovery means that dedicated doctors, like Dr Coates who will be addressing the conference on Monday, are now one major step closer to developing a treatment. Dr Coates' work with Aboriginal children has also lead to earlier repair of ear drums and consequently less permanent hearing loss. There are also innovative programs which have made a real difference to Aboriginal childrens' welfare, such as, the Swimming Pool Programme which has lead to lower ear infections due to the highly treated pool water. And apparently when admission to the swimming pool was linked to attendance at school, amazing new school attendance records were set.

In relation to new technology, the progress has been enormous and there seems to be no end in sight. There is now a wide variety of technology products available to the hearing impaired to assist them in their daily lives. For example, assistive listening devices operate by excluding background noise and providing individual volume control. They are helpful in listening to the radio or television, and in public buildings where public address systems are installed. New technologies range from flashing and vibrating alarms, to home audit loops systems, infra red listening



devices, multi alarm systems, portable sound amplifiers and flashing door knock alerts amongst many other products. In addition, the captioned telephone is a new technology currently under development in the United States that allows people to receive word-for-word captions of their telephone conversations. There are also hearing dogs which are specially trained to alert their owner to a variety of sounds including a baby's cry, a door bell or to danger. Although I don't think one would really consider a hearing dog a technological device.

Despite all these new advancements, hearing impairment is still a major issue for people with this disability today. And hearing loss does not discriminate between nationality, social status, race or religion. It is therefore very important that national conferences such as this one are held to enable you to come together to discuss current and future developments and their benefits to the community. I would like to take this opportunity to welcome conference delegates to Perth and to convey my warmest wishes for a successful conference.