
Territory 2030

Submission

DeafNT



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DeafNT's submission to Territory 2030

DeafNT is a not for profit information and referral service, which provides support and advocacy to Deaf and Hard of Hearing people¹ of all ages. DeafNT is funded to enhance the quality of life experienced by Deaf people through providing services to maintain and increase their independence and assisting them to live as valued and participating members of the community.

This submission deals with all matters that affect the lives of Deaf (sign language users) and Hard of Hearing (those who use speech, lipreading and listening) people who have the right to reach their full potential. One of the most basic rights, and one that is often taken for granted, is that of language and communication. Language acquisition is a basic right and needs to be ensured for all individuals.

DeafNT believes that the following four themes are relevant for Deaf people in all regions of the NT:

1. Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage
2. Education
3. Health and wellbeing
4. Employment and workforce development

In order to ensure that the human rights of Deaf Territorians are adequately met by 2030, all of these areas must consider the rights of Deaf people as fundamental, and incorporate their needs at a practical level. This submission will attempt to suggest how this may be achieved.

Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage

Hearing loss is particularly relevant to Indigenous disadvantage. As stated on the Menzies School of Health Research "EarInfoNet" website:

Hearing loss is significantly worse in Indigenous communities than in the wider population. When it occurs in the first few years of life - a critical period of child development - it has major implications for speech and language development and learning. These negative effects are likely to be compounded in Aboriginal children, many of whom have to adapt to an educational environment where the language and culture differs from that of their home environment.²

Clearly, dealing with the issues pertaining to those who are Deaf will be one step along the path toward closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage. Issues discussed below are around the Territory 2030 themes of education, health and wellbeing and are directly relevant to Indigenous disadvantage.

¹ For the sake of brevity, this document will use the term "Deaf" to also include people who are Hard of Hearing

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http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/html/html_community/ear_health_community/reviews/ear_our_review.htm#twentyseven
accessed 18 February 2009

Education

Education - issues

Education of Deaf children in the NT is a major concern. For children who have missed out on development opportunities prior to commencing formal education, their schooling is vital. Unfortunately the specialist units for Deaf students that used to operate in a few schools in the Darwin region have all been closed. The only unit in the NT still open is Gillen Primary in Alice Springs.

The NT Department of Education and Training employs Education Advisors (Hearing) to work with Deaf students. These Advisors are based mainly in Darwin and Alice Springs and, as hard as they work, struggle to provide all the support required of them by students across the Territory. Distance is a factor, with some Advisors driving six hours one way to visit a student. This obviously takes up a great deal of their time.

Education - suggestions for inclusion in the Territory 2030 Plan

DeafNT submits that the Territory 2030 Plan recognises that all children have the right to education and a peer group. DeafNT suggests that this could be achieved by:

- Establishing hubs or units for Deaf students
- Providing professional development in Auslan and visual communication for teachers, Integration Support Aides (ISAs) and Education Advisors through these hubs
- Improving language, self-esteem and mental health by ensuring students spend time with their peers, other Deaf students
- Providing role models who are Deaf
- Ensuring Indigenous cultural rules are respected
- Communicating with all stakeholders e.g. parents, students, audiologists, school, peak bodies, communities

Health and wellbeing

A major factor in adequate physical health is an understanding of the basic concepts of healthy living. This understanding is compromised in those who haven't attained a complete language.

Otitis media (middle ear infection) is an additional factor for the health of Indigenous Territorians. It is widely acknowledged that these infections are suffered disproportionately in Indigenous communities, causing hearing loss.

A major factor in adequate mental health is the ability to express and understand feelings, and to communicate with others. Again, this is compromised for those without a complete language.

Incomplete language acquisition has an enormously detrimental effect on health and wellbeing, and will affect their whole lives, including relationships and employability. This needs to be addressed while children are young. This is discussed below:

Language acquisition - issues

Early diagnosis of hearing loss or deafness and appropriate action are vital. Anecdotal reports from parents to DeafNT show delays in the scheduling of public audiology services scheduled. Once a diagnosis is made, appropriate action needs to occur to ensure that children have access to language. This may be through hearing aids, speech therapy, access to Auslan (Australian Sign Language), access to Auslan AND local Indigenous signing (e.g. Walpiri hand talk, Tiwi Island hand talk) as appropriate for the child and their culture.

At present in the NT, most services have their major focus on children's hearing and speech, rather than on children's access to language and subsequent opportunities to develop their potential. While some children benefit from this focus on hearing aids and listening, it has seriously detrimental ramifications for other children.

Hearing aids do not give a deaf child hearing, rather, they amplify certain frequencies. Those who are profoundly deaf do not have full access to the sounds of spoken language. This means they need to have access to a complete signed language (in Australia, Auslan) or they will miss out on language, and the intellectual and emotional development that comes with language. When children have a solid foundation in their first language, they are then able to develop additional language(s). This may be written or spoken English, and other languages.

In the NT, deaf children have missed out on language. Some of them have, in effect, been given an intellectual disability through missing out on the building blocks of life. This affects their education, employment, physical and mental health, social skills, relationships and every facet of their lives. This applies to Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike.

Indigenous children who are deaf can have the advantage of living in a community where signing is not stigmatised, and may have access to local hand talk. This advantage needs to be capitalised upon, with children (and ideally their community) also learning Auslan. This would enable children to have a complete language, and also to be able to work with Auslan interpreters when they need to access educational, medical, legal and other services.

For those children whose hearing loss is at a level where they can effectively acquire spoken language with hearing aids, other devices and professional support, services need to be at a level where this does in fact occur. Children can miss out on language due to inadequate staffing levels of these services.

Some Indigenous children, while they may be able to acquire language with the help of hearing aids, may not be able to use their hearing aids as much as necessary. This may be due to high humidity and temperature damaging their hearing aids or it may be due to collectivist Indigenous culture where ownership is not restricted to one person and hearing aids are shared by others in the community. Hearing aids also attract the stigma of difference known as "shame". Services must take this into account and provide culturally appropriate support to the child to ensure they do acquire a complete first language.

Language acquisition – suggestions for inclusion in the Territory 2030 Plan

DeafNT submits that the Territory 2030 Plan recognises that all children have the right to acquire a complete first language. DeafNT suggests that this could be achieved by:

- Ensuring communication with all stakeholders e.g. parents, audiologists, early intervention services, peak bodies, communities
- Providing early intervention services to ensure complete first language acquisition can be achieved
- Providing support and information to parents making the decision on the best methods of communication for their Deaf child
- Teaching families visual communication and the basics of Auslan through Auslan tutoring
- Encouraging and learning Indigenous communities' hand talk