

# Prime Minister, not all silence is golden!

Dear Prime Minister

On 2 September 2014, the Senate's Community Affairs Committee tabled the final report of its national inquiry into the *Prevalence of different types of speech, language and communication disorders and speech pathology services in Australia*.

It is now **889 days** since the committee reported. And despite numerous promises from the previous Minister for Health and her office, there has been no formal response from your government!

No word, no comment, and no action.

## **Detailed submissions from caring Australians**

In 2014, over 200 organisations and individuals made timely and detailed submissions to this important national inquiry. Many of the individuals were parents and carers of Australians who live in silence with a communication or swallowing disability.

## **Ten recommendations**

The Senate Committee's final report made **ten** recommendations. And while we understand that government cannot action every matter proposed, it is not unreasonable to expect a response to the reforms, ideas and changes proposed – especially when a response has been promised by the previous Minister.

All the undersigned, advocate and work on behalf of Australians with silent disabilities – speech, language, communication and swallowing disorders.

It is estimated over 1.1 million Australians have communication disabilities that impact on their quality of life. This figure is comparable with the number of people with diabetes and three times the number of those with dementia. Both of these conditions are national health priorities and attract significant attention and resourcing.

The impacts of communication disorders are far reaching and debilitating; resulting in poor education outcomes, reduced employment opportunities, and an increased likelihood of social, emotional and mental health issues.

## **Communication is a basic human right**

Communication is a basic human right. It is essential for social inclusion and for participation in all aspects of life. Likewise, swallowing is critical, and severe swallowing complications can lead to death. Other swallowing complications can lead to malnutrition and a variety of respiratory problems.

But communication and swallowing problems are largely invisible in public policy and public life in Australia.

Government leadership is, therefore, essential to raising awareness and formulating policy that is inclusive of people with communication and swallowing disorders. But government leadership has been lacking. Like communication disabilities, government leadership in this area is invisible and silent.

### **Early identification**

The early identification of communication problems is essential. This does not just mean recognising language problems in small children, but also the early identification of communication and swallowing problems associated with other conditions such as Parkinson's disease or stroke. There is very good evidence that the earlier problems are identified, and treatment initiated, the better the outcomes.

The provision of timely, evidence-based speech pathology services can therefore reduce economic and social costs to both individuals and society.

The current system of funding for speech pathology services in the government sector does not allow for evidence-based practice. Services (under Medicare and other publicly funded programs) are limited to a small fixed number of sessions. Too often, the number, frequency and type of care, is *not* based on what the evidence says 'works'.

Prime Minister, would you wonder why your chest infection hasn't cleared up if you were only given 'half of the antibiotic you were prescribed'?

### **Postcode lottery**

In Australia, access to speech pathology services is a postcode lottery!

It is almost impossible to access adequate services if you live in rural or remote Australia or if you are social-economically disadvantaged. And for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, without better information about their communication difficulties, we cannot service this unique population.

### **Leadership and responsibility**

Recently you called for and initiated the *Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory* – an action we commended you for taking. But, Prime Minister, did you know that research suggests that 50-90 per cent of young offenders have an underlying communication problem and that a strong correlation exists between the seriousness of offences and language disorders?

This is just one small example of the 'cost' of communication disorders to the Australian community.

But because communication and swallowing problems are faced by such diverse groups of Australians, services are delivered across so many different sectors of our society, and funded by all levels of government, no one has taken responsibility or provided the leadership necessary to make communication disorders a national priority.

It is now time for you and your government to respond in a meaningful way. Because Prime Minister, when it comes to communication disabilities – not all silence is golden!

We, the undersigned, look forward to an immediate and considered response to the national inquiry into the *Prevalence of different types of speech, language and communication disorders and speech pathology services in Australia*.

**Monday 6 February 2017**