



**Ear disease, anxiety and  
Indigenous access to health and  
education services**

**Dr. Damien Howard**

**Kalgoorlie May 2009**

I would like to acknowledge that we are on **Wongi Country** and also the importance that Indigenous people being in their Country, with family has for **Indigenous Wellbeing**.

This is one important way that the **social emotional stress** caused by widespread hearing loss among Indigenous people is managed.

# Mental health

- Adult hearing loss is associated with a greater risk of:
- Psychiatric disorders
- Affective mood disorders
- Poorer social relations
- Higher psycho-social impact of poor health

research with non-Indigenous people



Of 23 adult Aboriginal workers



14 workers had moderate or higher levels of anxiety and depression





12 of these 14 had hearing loss

9 workers had minimal or no signs of anxiety and depression





2 of these had hearing loss

There was a significant association  
between hearing loss and lower  
social and emotional wellbeing

$P = 0.0016$

This is consistent with findings of West Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey.

This is not just about hearing loss - other disadvantage is compounded by hearing loss. For example **crowded noisy housing** not only contributes to more Indigenous ear disease it also increases the negative social effects of hearing loss that results from childhood ear disease.

# Crowded housing stories

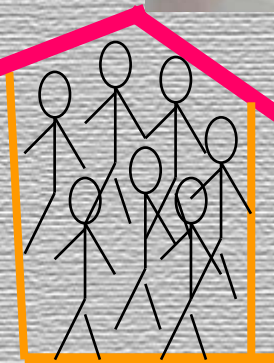
- *Woman with hearing loss thought her husband 'was mumbling' when there was lots of noise at home because of many visitors. She got angry with him, threw something, he hit her and went to jail.*



- *A new baby made it harder for father with hearing loss to hear. His wife wanted more help but he had trouble understanding her when the baby was crying. She got angry and one time hit him after she asked him to get something from the shop and he bought the wrong thing.*



- *A woman with hearing loss who was depressed was thinking about hurting herself. She got frustrated and angry trying to talk to people at home with so much noise because of too many people living in the house*





# Fishing – left out



Person with hearing loss

Person with hearing loss



Basketball

# Left out or teased

Person with hearing loss



# Video

- Personal experiences of Aboriginal people with hearing loss.

# Strength focused consultations

- Having a hearing loss creates repeated negative social experiences.
- When consulting about problems related to ear disease/hearing loss including a 'strengths focus' helps to make consultation less negative and shaming - so kids want to come again!
  - Ask others about children's strengths before consultations and talk about these during consultations.
  - Feedback to kids and families your observations of strengths during consultations.



**Stepping  
forward  
to help**

**Better access  
through less  
anxiety**

Anxiety is the mental health condition most strongly associated with mild to moderate levels of hearing loss in the non-Indigenous population.

# Anxiety and avoidance – a story



**But communication strategies  
can help minimise anxiety**

# Easy Listening

# Hard Listening

Easy Listening	Moderately hard listening	Hard listening
<b>PLACE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Low background noise</li><li>•Loud signal</li><li>•Little reverberation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Mixture of low &amp; high background noise, loud &amp; quiet signals and variable reverberation</li><li>•Moderate levels of all three</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•High background noise</li><li>•Quiet signal</li><li>•High reverberation</li></ul>
<b>PERSON</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Family member</li><li>•Familiar person from the same culture</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Unfamiliar person from the same culture</li><li>•Familiar person from another culture</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Unfamiliar person from another culture</li></ul>
<b>MESSAGE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Familiar words that place what is said within a known conceptual framework</li><li>•Strong contextual or visual clues that help explain what is said</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Some unfamiliar words about topics that may or may not be known</li><li>•Some or no visual cues</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Unfamiliar words about new topics</li><li>•No contextual or visual cues</li></ul>

# Communications Strategies

## INDICATIONS OF LISTENING DIFFICULTIES

**Very quiet and shy in meetings**

**Needs others to help explain again**

**Misunderstands and/or goes off topic**

**Takes long breaks or leaves long meetings**

**Talks a lot  
– dominates conversations**

## Resources

*Use sound field amplification equipment if large group*



*Use individual amplification for one to one communication when hearing loss indicated*



# Individual amplification devices



Using amplification device with patient

# Chronic disease management

*“Before we would have chase up on people to find out where they were and sometimes they would slip though system and we would not see them again. Using the amplifier they are now turning up for appointments, doing their blood sugars – there is better compliance. I am able to use education tools more – they show they understand by nodding, before they would mostly not have a clue of what I was saying.”*

***Aboriginal Diabetes educator***



## Using amplification with Koori health clients

*“The compliance of patients improved and the interaction improved. People were taking medications and getting to appointments I made for them with specialists. Clients also asked for more information and consultations became longer. People’s participation in their own health management improved. It also decreased the likelihood of me stereotyping the client. I no longer thought some clients limited communication was about cultural matters – involving women or men’s business, which was untrue.”*

***Dr Hung The Nguyen speaking about using an amplification device with some of his Koori clients in Melbourne***



# When providing individual support in schools



*The first thing that happened was that kids stopped just watching my face while we were reading together. Instead they looked at the book we were reading and that really helped their reading skills (literacy support worker)*

The benefits of classroom based individual support is diminished by background noise making it hard to hear the person speaking. Amplification can enhance the benefits of individual support without risk of shame – it is the support worker’s amplification device that is used with all children they work with.

# Communications Strategies for Meetings

## Notes for Board Members

### Roles and support

These are the notes on discussions during training workshop  
Two way communication.

Board Members tell the community about organisation and tell the community's story back.



### Speaking up about complaints.

One important role of Board Members was to collect stories of what people are not happy with so they can be collected and written down. We talked about how Katherine hospital had said there had been few written complaints even there were often things that community members were not happy about.



### Patient travel policy

Board members discussed how some issues become urgent to address because of things that happen. One urgent was the need to develop a patient travel policy. Board suggested that all old people need an escort. They also talked about planning for who is



1.

## VISUAL NOTES

Using visual icons to help improve readability of documents

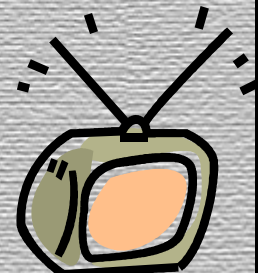
2.

TYPING UP THE TALK  
Using a data projector to project minutes onto wall as they are being taken



3.

VIDEO MINUTES  
Video meeting summary and distribute as a DVD



# Making things familiar

## Easy Listening

### PLACE

- Low background noise
- Loud signal
- Little reverberation

### PERSON

- Family member
- Familiar person from the same culture

### MESSAGE

- Familiar words that place what is said within a known conceptual framework
- Strong contextual or visual clues that help explain what is said

# Why is familiarity important

- We assume everyone listens the same way – they don't
- Those with listening difficulties rely more on 'thinking listening strategies' to compensate for diminished auditory input
  - As everyone at the dinner last night did to some extent
- Thinking listening strategies depend having knowledge
  - Being familiar with context, processes, people
- Helping people with hearing loss get familiar with these things helps them to better understand what is said and reduce anxiety

# Getting familiar with what to expect



Video record someone doing the unfamiliar thing



Create a DVD and give to those who will be going to do the same thing



Others watch on TV and become familiar with what they can expect



# Indigenous communication brokers

- Indigenous people – especially local people
  - Judge people less because of communication difficulties
  - Speak the language that is easiest to understand
  - Have better ‘body language’ skills
  - Have a shared cultural framework with clients
  - Usually have a longer relationship history and will stay around longer !

Local people involved in providing local services is hugely important

**Kids getting familiar  
at school**

# Think about worries

- Be aware that children may be anxious in many situations
- Help them to understand what is happening in different situations
- Try to find out what they think is happening and clarify any misunderstandings



# Transparency

- Make processes transparent and observable.
- Be verbally explicit.
- Prepare for what to expect in disciplinary processes.
  - Validate that the process is impersonal- tell of stories of other's similar treatment.

# Relationships

- Teachers and children relate best to:
  - people they understand
  - similar cultural background
  - similar socio-economic background
  - shared language code
  - shared expectations of behaviour
  - shared experiences - positive relationship

# Behaviour problems

Consider if the behaviour is related to 'familiarity factors' and hearing loss.

- Is the **person**(s) communicating with someone known?
- Is the **place** *where the* problem arises unfamiliar and/or noisy ?
- Is the **process** or task familiar, what are the listening demands ?

# Change

- Because of reliance on the familiar, change can be difficult
- Give warning of change
- Tell and show how things will be different
- Give a chance to observe before new demands are placed on children with listening difficulties



# **Less Anxiety = Easier Access**

**To:**

- **educational opportunities,**
- **health care,**
- **employment,**
- **mainstream services.**

# Internet Sites

[www.eartroubles.com](http://www.eartroubles.com)

<http://www.hstac.com.au/HearThis/>

The cards at the front have these on them

Thanks to Elaine Cox, Stephen Torres Carne, Candace Miler, Lou Leidwinger, Sheri Lochner, Marianne Arietta, Harvey Dillon and the Indigenous workers who participated in the research.