



**Media Release
19 August 2009**

Nelson silences deaf people

Dr Brendan Nelson MP will tomorrow exclude the voice of deaf people from discussions about the needs of deaf babies and children.

Dr Nelson is hosting a parliamentary symposium on infant and early childhood deafness at Parliament House, Canberra, tomorrow, 20th August. According to a list sent out on 4th August, 24 people have been invited to the symposium. Of these 24 people, 12 are providers of audiology, cochlear implant and speech training programs which exclude the use of Auslan (Australian Sign Language); four are medical doctors, three of these specifically cochlear implant surgeons; and two are Cochlear Limited (the manufacturer of the cochlear implant) representatives. The remaining six are a provider of general support services for deaf children; a parent representative; an education expert; a representative of the general deafness field, including service providers; a deaf person who has recently published a book about his life experiences; and Health Minister Nicola Roxon's advisor.

A total of 22 hearing people (including only one representative of parents of deaf children), and two deaf people will come together to decide what is best for deaf children. However, of the two deaf people, one is representing service providers as well as deaf people so is hardly likely to be in a position to put the interests of deaf children before the interests of service providers. This leaves only one deaf person who is, however, able to represent only his own personal views.

Concerned about the serious lack of representation for parents and deaf people, and the obvious bias towards cochlear implants as "the solution" to infant and childhood deafness, Deaf Australia wrote to Dr Nelson requesting a place at the symposium. Dr Nelson refused this request.

Recently the Australian Government released a report, *Shut Out!* which details the lived experience of people with disabilities and the shocking extent to which they are excluded from Australian society.

"Dr Nelson is clearly intent on continuing this appalling record of exclusion by deliberately refusing to allow at the symposium an advocate for the very people – deaf people themselves – who have

most to offer the discussion and the most important stake in the decisions made,” said Deaf Australia President Kyle Miers.

“Until policy makers look outside the medical and allied professions and make an effort to understand and accept what bona fide representatives of deaf Australians and their families have to say, deaf children will continue to have access only to very limited services that do not address the needs of the whole person or ensure they receive the best possible language acquisition and education programs to fulfil their potential. This is the tragedy of the current situation in Australia and we see this symposium as unlikely to do anything to improve it,” Mr Miers said.

Recently Deaf Australia sent to the Australian Government a policy advice paper outlining the current situation for early intervention programs for deaf and hard of hearing children, and calling for the development of a national plan for the widespread provision of world’s best practice bilingual early intervention programs for deaf children, including those who have a cochlear implant.

Bilingual early intervention programs, provided that they also support the family to acquire Auslan, are the only programs that allow the child to acquire a native language (Auslan) naturally and to also acquire a spoken language. Every child should be enabled to develop to the extent possible their ability to speak. No child should be denied access to Auslan.

“Regardless of what happens at this symposium, Deaf Australia will continue to work with the Australian Government towards reforming our early intervention programs for deaf and hard of hearing children,” said Deaf Australia Executive Officer Karen Lloyd AM.

About Deaf Australia:

Deaf Australia, established in 1986, is the leading national peak body managed by Deaf people that represents, promotes, preserves, and informs the development of, the Australian Deaf community, its language and cultural heritage. It provides an information and advocacy service for Deaf people who are bilingual in English and Auslan (Australian Sign Language).

Deaf Australia is funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

Further information:

Deaf Australia Inc.: www.deafau.org.au

Contact:

Karen Lloyd

Executive Officer

Email: karen.Lloyd@deafau.org.au

Ph: 07 3357 8266

-----ends-----