



Thursday, 18 January 2024

Manager Policy and Legislative Services
WorkCover WA
2 Bedbrook Place
Shenton Park WA 6008

By email: consultation@workcover.wa.gov.au

To the Manager of Policy and Legislative Services,

Hearing Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in response to *Implementation Consultation Paper 20: Noise Induced Hearing Loss*, regarding proposed regulations and implementation requirements under the *Workers Compensation and Injury Management Act 2023*.

About Hearing Australia

For over 75 years Hearing Australia has provided expert hearing care to Australians. We are a statutory Commonwealth entity and the largest provider of government funded hearing services nationally. We employ around 550 audiologists and audiometrists across Australia, and provide services to over 280,000 children and adults with hearing loss each year. Hearing Australia supports initiatives to prevent hearing loss and advocates for improved access to, and quality of, hearing services across Australia. This includes working with high-risk industries to prevent noise induced hearing loss.

Our research arm, the National Acoustic Laboratories (NAL), delivers world-leading hearing research to transform the lives of people with hearing difficulties – including those at risk of or experiencing noise induced hearing loss. As far back as in 1982 NAL conducted research into community reactions to aircraft noise, resulting in the Australian Noise Exposure Forecast criteria subsequently adopted by the Australian Government. More recently, NAL published a report for the Department of Health and Aged Care on prevention strategies to reduce hearing loss in Australiaⁱ, which in-part recommended workplace hearing tests to raise awareness levels of noise induced hearing loss amongst high-risk noise-exposed workers.

Our approach to noise induced hearing loss

Occupational noise induced hearing loss is an under-recognised and under-addressed issue in Australian workplaces projected to cost our economy \$5.5 billion in wellbeing losses and \$21.3 billion in productivity losses over the lifespan of the existing working populationⁱⁱ. Too often, employers, employees, and regulators fail to recognise noise exposure as a priority WHS issue, and too many businesses lack sufficient knowledge of the effects of loud noise on hearing and the impact of hearing loss on quality of lifeⁱⁱⁱ.

In Australia, around 37 percent of adult hearing loss is estimated to be preventable^{iv}. As a result, Hearing Australia strongly supports a preventative approach to noise induced hearing loss for high-risk noise-exposed workers, including the application of controls, baseline audiometric testing, and regular monitoring. This is nationally recognised as a best practice approach to preventing noise induced hearing loss, with most jurisdictions adopting Safe Work Australia's Model WHS laws^v.

When implemented correctly and in combination with other hearing conservation methods, baseline testing and regular monitoring provides an opportunity for the early detection of noise induced hearing loss. By identifying changes in the hearing thresholds of high-risk workers over time, workers and employers can take action to prevent hearing loss or further damage *before* it becomes severe enough to qualify for workers compensation. Further, regular hearing tests benefit workers by raising awareness of noise induced hearing loss. Workers who undertake a hearing test have been shown to have “more positive attitudes towards noise and hearing loss prevention” for at least 12 months after testing^{vi}.

This submission

Hearing Australia recognises that the proposed regulations and implementation requirements regarding noise induced hearing loss under the *Workers Compensation and Injury Management Act 2023* aim to streamline the process for noise induced hearing loss assessments and workers compensation claims. Our key priority is safeguarding the hearing of noise-exposed workers by ensuring they:

- a) have access to audiometric testing and appropriate information on their hearing status
- b) are provided interventions to avoid or reduce the impact of noise induced hearing loss,
- c) can access pathways for rehabilitation and compensation where appropriate.

Ensuring appropriate audiometric testing for noise-exposed workers

With Clause 58 of *Work Health and Safety (General) Regulations 2022* coming into effect on 31 March 2024, audiometric testing will become mandatory for workers in Western Australia who are frequently exposed to excessive noise within three months of commencing work, and at least every two years thereafter^{vii}. If implemented effectively, the new testing requirements under the *Work Health and Safety (General) Regulations 2022* should appropriately safeguard workers if mandatory preliminary testing is removed from the *Workers Compensation and Injury Management Act 2023*.

We encourage WorkCover WA and WorkSafe WA to work to ensure that any legislative changes do not affect the ability of noise-exposed workers to access audiometric testing through their employer.

Addressing barriers to testing

We would like to highlight the barriers facing workers requesting a hearing test.

Proposed regulations and implementation requirements under the *Workers Compensation and Injury Management Act 2023* place the onus on the worker to approach their employer and request an audiological assessment if hearing loss is suspected.

This approach has the potential to create barriers to help-seeking behaviour, which may be exacerbated if a) the workplace does not have a culture of prioritising hearing conservation, b) perceived power inequities exist within the workplace, or c) a worker’s position or cultural norms deter them from speaking up.

It takes approximately ten years for an individual who would benefit from hearing aids to seek help with their hearing^{viii}. Due to the slow onset and cumulative nature of noise induced hearing loss, many workers may not realise their hearing is at risk until it is too late. Even when hearing loss has been identified, workers may choose not to seek health advice or apply for workers compensation due to

perceived stigma, concerns about employment status, cultural attitudes, or perceived inevitability of hearing loss in high-risk sectors^{ix}.

Proposed regulations and implementation requirements should consider how workers can be empowered to access pathways for rehabilitation and compensation when these barriers are encountered. It is recommended that WorkCover WA and WorkSafe WA collaborate to address this issue.

Mechanisms to reduce noise exposure

We encourage WorkCover WA to consider ways in which workers can be protected from continued exposure to excessive noise in the workplace. If a compensable hearing loss is identified, mechanisms should be in place to ensure persons conducting a business or undertaking are aware of the case and applying appropriate controls to prevent further injury.

Streamlining authorisation processes

Finally, we recommend that the process to become an authorised audiologist under these regulations be as simple and streamlined as possible, with the only requirement being membership of a professional body (Audiology Australia, Australian College of Audiology, or Hearing Aid Audiology Society of Australia).

In other jurisdictions, Hearing Australia provides the relevant authority with a list of clinicians with current qualifications each year to be considered authorised to undertake testing for purposes of workers' compensation. Audiologists are already highly trained, in high demand, and have a number of professional development requirements placed upon them. Removing additional training requirements for authorisation will reduce barriers to entry and burden on the profession.

We thank you for your consideration of this feedback and welcome further engagement in relation to this consultation.

Yours sincerely,



Kim Terrell

Managing Director

ⁱ NAL (2020) *Making a Noise About Hearing: Factors to consider when developing hearing health awareness messages for Australians*. Prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Health. Retrieved at <https://www.nal.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/NAL-May-2020-September-2020-update-Report.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Si S, Lewkowski K, Fritschi L, Heyworth J, Liew D, Li I. (2020) Productivity Burden of Occupational Noise-Induced Hearing Loss in Australia: A Life Table Modelling Study. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. Jun 29;17(13):4667. doi: 10.3390/ijerph17134667. PMID: 32610505; PMCID: PMC7369732.

ⁱⁱⁱ NAL (2020) *Making a Noise About Hearing: Factors to consider when developing hearing health awareness messages for Australians*. Prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Health. Retrieved at <https://www.nal.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/NAL-May-2020-September-2020-update-Report.pdf>

^{iv} Hearing Care Industry Association (2017) *The Social and Economic Cost of Hearing Loss in Australia – Final report by Deloitte Access Economics*. Retrieved via http://www.hcia.com.au/hcia-wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Social-and-Economic-Cost-of-Hearing-Health-in-Australia_June-2017.pdf

^v Safe Work Australia (2023). *Model Work Health and Safety Bill*. Retrieved via https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-12/model-whs-bill-23_november_2023.pdf

^{vi} Williams, W., et al. (2004). Does the presentation of audiometric test data have a positive effect on the perception of workplace noise and noise exposure avoidance? *Noise and Health*, 6(24), 75-84.

vii Government of Western Australia Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety (2023). Work Health and Safety (General) Regulations 2022 – transitional and savings provisions (Revised May 2023). Retrieved via [Work Health and Safety \(General\) Regulations 2022 – transitional and savings provisions - information sheet \(dmirs.wa.gov.au\)](#)

viii Johns Hopkins Medicine. The Hidden Risks of Hearing Loss. Retrieved from <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/the-hidden-risks-of-hearing-loss>

ix Safe Work Australia (2010). Occupational Noise-Induced Hearing Loss in Australia. Retrieved via [occupational noiseinduced hearing loss australia 2010.pdf \(safeworkaustralia.gov.au\)](#)