



Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance Pre-Budget 2016 Consultation

Executive Summary:

Speech-Language & Audiology Canada (SAC) is Canada's premier association representing the professions of audiology and speech-language pathology. SAC is the largest association of its kind in Canada, with over 6,000 speech-language pathologists, audiologists and communication health assistants. These professionals are dedicated to improving the communication health of Canadians. They help Canadians with speech, language, swallowing, hearing, balance, auditory processing and other auditory disorders.

SAC has worked to achieve high national standards of practice in speech-language pathology and audiology in Canada and maintains a strong tradition of collaborating with provincial and territorial professional associations and regulatory bodies as well as working closely with other health care partners, both domestically and internationally.

This submission includes three recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Support and leadership from the federal government for provincial and territorial programs offering early hearing detection and intervention (EHDI) programs, as it establishes a new Health Accord with the provinces and territories.

Recommendation 2: As part of a renewed, nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous peoples, the federal government should encourage first nations' communities to participate in the providing of services and the implementation of speech, language and hearing programs within their communities.

Recommendation 3: Incorporate the expertise of Canada's audiologists and speech-language pathologists into the federal government's collaborative efforts with stakeholders during the establishment of the Canadian Centre for Aging and Brain Health Innovation.

Why is Communication Health Important?

One in six Canadians has a speech, language or hearing disorder. The ability to speak, hear and be heard is extremely important to our daily lives and communication is the vital link between human beings. For children specifically, the ability to communicate effectively with others is the very foundation of their social, emotional and educational development.

Early identification and intervention of a communication disorder is absolutely key: the earlier a communication problem is identified, the better the chances for improvement or even recovery. Because learning is a cumulative process, difficulties early-on can have a cascading effect on the rest of a child's life. A slow start out of the gate will mean playing catch-up for years to come. Early problems with speech and language development can result in later life high risk behaviours, depression, poor resiliency and isolation in society.

Early identification of communication disorders is important at any stage in life. Canada's ageing population is creating an increased need for services that care for the elderly, including rehabilitation centres and nursing homes. Speech-language pathologists and audiologists are vital contributors to the health of those recovering from strokes or treatment of the degenerative effects of Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease and other forms of age-related dementia. In fact, individuals with hearing loss are 2 to 5 times more likely to develop dementia in their lifetime and 95% of people with dementia have difficulty communicating.

Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology - The Federal Budget:

SAC recognizes that health care and education fall under provincial and territorial jurisdiction; however, a failure to ensure the communication health of the people of Canada, both young and old, will ultimately cost the federal government down the road.

A child's vocabulary upon entering school is a prime predictor of school success or failure. In fact, every \$1 spent on early childhood health and development saves up to \$9 in future health, social and justice services equating to a return on investment of 800%.

In Canada, boys with language impairment have higher rates of arrests and convictions than boys who do not. Because hearing loss causes difficulties with auditory attention, memory and comprehension, 47% of Canadians between the ages of 15 and 64 who have a hearing limitation report being unemployed.

According to population projections, by 2041 almost 25% of Canadians will be over the age of 65. Since the risk of dementia and neurodegenerative disease increases with age, the number of Canadians living with these conditions will grow and there will be increasing healthcare costs.

Solutions:

The communication health of Canadians can be dramatically improved by simple, inexpensive but targeted action by the federal government in the 2016 federal budget. SAC recommends the following solutions:

- 1.** The federal government should actively support standardized early hearing detection and intervention (EHDI) programs throughout the country. EHDI programs use an inexpensive and painless test to quickly and accurately screen infants for permanent congenital hearing loss (PCHL). The screening process is simple and should be performed before a baby is discharged from the hospital. This first step will ensure that babies with hearing loss are identified and subsequently access vital early intervention services.

An SAC report from March 2014 on the status of Canada's EHDI programs concluded that over half of the nation's provinces and territories do not have adequate EHDI programs in place. A 2016 Progress report on this issue indicates that very little progress has been made since 2014.

As it works to establish a new Health Accord with its provincial and territorial counterparts, the federal government needs to ensure that they invest in early hearing detection and intervention programs in order to guarantee that all children in Canada have access to comprehensive hearing services, regardless in which province or territory they live.

2. The federal government has committed to re-engaging Indigenous peoples in a renewed nation-to-nation process to make progress on important issues such as health care. During these consultations, Indigenous communities should be encouraged to collaborate and participate in the delivery of communication health services and determine ways to build capacity for training community members to play a supportive role in delivering speech, language and hearing programs.

Strengthening these communities' capacities to support communication health programs, which are regionally appropriate and culturally sensitive, serve a dual-purpose of both improving the quality of the health care for its inhabitants and helping current and future generations in maintaining their Indigenous languages and bilingual capabilities.

An improvement to the on-reserve Income Assistance Program with First Nations is needed to ensure that recipients have the incentive to participate in the training necessary to gain employment. This could be addressed with a small portion of the funds that the 2015 Budget has committed to investing in Indigenous and northern communities with priority health areas, which will help reduce the reliance on outside health care systems and medical travel.

3. The experience and expertise of Canada's audiologists and speech-language pathologists should be incorporated into the federal government's collaborative efforts with stakeholders during the establishment of the Canadian Centre for Aging and Brain Health Innovation

As part of the 2015 Budget, the federal government proposed to provide up to \$42 million over five years, starting in 2015–16, to help improve seniors' cognitive health through the establishment of the Canadian Centre for Aging and Brain Health Innovation.

Communication health and aging is currently a central focus for SAC. The association applauds this initiative and the government's efforts in addressing the need for collaboration and innovation as age-related cognitive impairment and chronic conditions are becoming more prevalent in Canada.