

## Submission to Inquiry into the Disability Discrimination Act

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**Social Impact of the DDA on people with complex communication needs / severe communication impairments.**

**The following set of statements is an attempt to outline an issue of concern which can be supported by research with three groups.**

Group one consisted of N = 453 people who identify as “a person with a disability” and in receipt of social security payment. They were not identified as communication impaired and not identified as a person who receives some assistance from a caregiver.

Group two consisted of N = 186 people who identify as “a person with a disability” and in receipt of social security and identified as a person who receives at least some assistance from a caregiver.

Group three consisted of N = 49 people who identify as “a person with a disability” was over twelve years of age but under sixteen years of age at the time of interview, and whose family is in receipt of a disability allowance for that person.

**\*NB** People who identified as *primarily* hearing or sight impaired were not included in these samples.

No attempt has been made to include any specific data, some of which is still being analysed, here.

- (1) People with complex communication needs and/or severe communication impairments are not able to make themselves heard as effectively as other people with disabilities, if they are able to make themselves heard at all. They lack access to common, well recognised pathways of communication open to the wider community. This lack of access imposes unacceptable restrictions on almost every aspect of daily life. It has major implications for schooling and employment opportunities as well as social interaction.
- (2) Lack of access to common pathways of communication can also lead to a much higher risk of abuse. It can severely restrict access to services intended for both people with disabilities as well as those without disabilities. Even where access exists it can restrict choice, if choice exists at all, in an unacceptable manner.
- (3) Communication impairments can take many forms. They occur across a wide range of disabilities. They often go unrecognised, especially when there are competing physical, intellectual and social needs. The very nature of the problem means that those most affected by it are not able to speak easily on their own behalf. ***The consequent result is a complex range of unrecognised problems which have other wide ranging social, economic and legal consequences.***

- (4) **The DDA has encouraged the growth of advocacy organisations.** There is a tendency for these organisations to cater to the needs and desires of the more articulate person with a disability and/or those who care for them. Many of these organisations have well developed lines of communication with advocates who are highly skilled in such matters as addressing meetings, making submissions, negotiating with policy makers and both obtaining and using media time.
- (5) **A consequence of this approach to using the DDA has been the failure to listen to many other people with disabilities who have related communication impairments** and whose needs and aspirations are sometimes very different from those raised by advocacy organisations. Where these needs and aspirations also differ from notions of what is “politically correct” the individual may not be able to access necessary assistance even when they have been to find a way of requesting it. The combined existence of the DDA and so many advocacy organisations has made it more difficult for some individuals to be heard since individuals are frequently advised to go through an advocacy organisation.
- (6) However people with complex communication needs and/or severe communication impairments more often than not do not have ready access to advocacy organisations. Lack of access can arise out of ignorance of the existence of advocacy organisations and what they can do. *There has been an assumption that the combined existence of the DDA and a range of advocacy groups has caused a rise in the level of, and access to, information. This is not necessarily accurate.*
- (7) There is also evidence to suggest that, on the basis of the above mentioned research, an estimated over half a million adult Australians are not able to access a telephone with complete independence and privacy. This should be considered to be the minimum to prevent abuse.
- (8) The research also suggests people who identify themselves as a “person with a disability” have significantly lower levels of access to a telephone, capacity to deal with personal mail, access to and ability to use a computer, access to other sources of information such as newspapers, libraries and the general news media. The results suggest there is a need to focus much more closely on communication related issues if the needs of all people with disabilities are going to be more easily met.
- (9) The same research suggests that, where an individual relies on a means of augmentative and/or alternative communication, an adequate communication system can reduce the “hands on” time taken to care for someone who needs assistance with daily activities by as much forty minutes per day.
- (10) The research also showed that *the AAC devices most likely to be used and made always available were low technology aids costing very little. However the flow on from the DDA and notions of “political correctness” has encouraged people to look for and expect high technology oriented equipment to be made available in the belief that this is in keeping with reducing discrimination against disabilities and encouraging a, perhaps “politically correct”, belief that this will, as far as possible, make the individual “like everyone else”.*

(11) The **DDA Standards Act Project** was convened to consider, in part, access to information and communication. *It is suggested that this committee needs to be reconvened with input from at least one person who has an understanding of complex communication needs. It is also suggested that the committee needs to consider a much broader definition of communication impairment and the implications of this.*

This submission is being made in an effort to have the difficulties faced by people with complex communication needs acknowledged and recognised. While the cost of illiteracy has now been, to some extent, recognised by governments and other service providers the wider problems posed by other communication needs have not yet been recognised. The financial and social cost to the individual and society should be of concern. It is submitted that, with the best of intentions, the DDA may actually have unintentionally contributed to the problem. A greater awareness of the issue could lead to the much more effective expenditure of the funds provided for disability services overall.