

‘Dad was alone in his head’—National Relay Service telephone solutions for people with a hearing impairment

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Annabel has worked as education and information officer for the outreach team at the National Relay Service for over three years. Prior to this she worked with specialised technology at NovitaTech, South Australia and the Independent Living Centre of Western Australia.

Hearing loss is isolating. People who are deaf or have a hearing loss may lose contact with their family and friends and be unable to conduct day to day activities like arranging appointments or ringing for information. This can lead to withdrawal from the community, loss of confidence, feelings of exclusion and isolation and in some cases, depression. There are also indications that hearing loss is associated with a reduced health-related quality of life (Hogan et al, 2009).

To quote the daughter of an elderly man who has a hearing impairment: “Dad was alone in his house and alone in his head”. (National Relay Service, 2010). The impact of hearing loss may be felt to an even greater extent by people in rural and remote areas who often rely on the telephone to maintain contact with their family and friends, to obtain information and arrange access to services.

As our population ages, the incidence of hearing loss is increasing. Over half of the population aged between sixty and seventy have a hearing loss. This increases to more than seventy per cent for people aged over 70 (Wilson, et al, 1998 and eighty per cent of those aged over eighty (Mitchell, et al 2002).

There are also higher risks for some people in rural and regional areas. The Farm Noise and Hearing Project reports that sixty to eighty per cent of farmers between the ages of thirty and seventy were found to have significant hearing loss which could be attributed to exposure to farm noise.

The National Relay Service (NRS) can provide a much needed lifeline for people of any age who are isolated by hearing loss. The NRS is a Federal Government initiative which is free of charge and accessible to anyone who has a standard telephone line. The NRS provides a “relay officer” as a central link between the hearing person and the person with a hearing impairment. They can type the words of the hearing person so they show up on the screen of a special telephone used by the person with a hearing impairment. There are a number of different ways to use the service, and it can also be used by those who have a speech impairment.

There are many people who could be utilising the services of the National Relay Service, but who do not know that it is available. We would strongly encourage people working in the Rural Health area to pass on this information within their local communities in order to assist people with a hearing loss to take back control of their telecommunications.

References

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