



**AUSTRALIAN  
ASSOCIATION  
OF THE DEAF INC.**

**Supply and Demand for Auslan Interpreting:  
the Deaf Perspective**

**Discussion Paper**



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## **Why is this paper about supply and demand of Auslan Interpreting?**

Australian Association of the Deaf Inc (AAD) receives annual funding from the Department of Families, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA). Our current funding agreement with FaCSIA requires that we provide one policy paper for the Australian Government before 31 March 2007. AAD and FaCSIA agreed that the policy paper would focus on the supply and demand of Auslan interpreting.

In Australia today, there is growing concern about the increasing demand for Auslan interpreters and the difficulty that the available interpreters have in meeting the interpreting needs of the Deaf community. There have been several discussions between concerned organisations, individuals and government to explore ways that the issues can be resolved. The Australian Government commissioned Orima Research to do a report on the supply and demand of Auslan interpreters and this was completed in January 2004. As a result of this study, in 2004 the Australian Government allocated \$18.4 million over four years for private medical interpreting and the National Auslan Interpreter Booking and Payment Service (NABS) began operating early in 2005.

The Orima study was mainly interested in medical interpreting, but also looked at some of the issues related to interpreting supply and demand for legal and financial matters and for education and employment.

In 2006 the Australian Government provided funding to the Australian Federation of Deaf Societies to do a pilot study on the use of interpreting in employment. From January 2007, the Australian Government has allocated \$5million over 4 years for Auslan interpreting for some employment situations – the Auslan for Employment (AFE) program.

Despite these initiatives, many of the issues of supply and demand for Auslan interpreting continue, and some new issues have arisen.

AAD is keen to know your honest comments and your views about the need for (demand) and the provision of (supply) of interpreting. This will help us develop a paper for the Australian government that sets out the Deaf view on the supply and demand of interpreting. Your contribution is very important for AAD and the Deaf community because the more responses we receive, the better we can explain to the government what the issues are. This is your opportunity to tell the government what you think about interpreting services.

AAD will hold community consultation meetings about this discussion paper in February and early March 2007. These meetings will be in Auslan and we will explain in Auslan what the discussion paper says. Watch the AAD website [www.aad.org.au](http://www.aad.org.au) for information on when community consultation meetings will be held in your state.

This discussion paper is accompanied by a questionnaire that will ask you about your own experiences with interpreting. If there are issues we have not covered in this paper, please tell us about them in the questionnaire.

When you fill out the questionnaire we do not need you to give us your name or contact details. Your answers will be put into a summary of responses. From this information AAD will write a policy document for the government explaining what we think the issues are from Deaf people's point of view, and what needs to happen.

## **Demand for Auslan interpreters**

The demand for interpreters is growing and changing. Many Deaf people now are more independent, better educated, more assertive and aware of their rights.

In “the old days” often Deaf people put up with doing without interpreters in many situations; or they relied on family or friends who knew a bit of sign to “interpret” for them or even to do things for them or make decisions on their behalf; or they just didn’t do a lot of things they would have liked to do.

Not anymore.

Of course, some Deaf people still do this, but an increasing number are now asserting their right to have an Auslan interpreter in all kinds of situations. We are requesting interpreters more often for more and more situations.

### **What can we get an interpreter for – free?**

There are many situations where we need an interpreter and can get the interpreter free. The interpreter is paid for by government or by the organisation providing the service or arranging the event, for example:

- doctors appointments;
- public hospitals;
- other health professionals;
- education;
- meetings with government departments and agencies (eg Centrelink);
- workplace meetings;
- conferences;
- courts;
- employment services;
- and so on...

However, we cannot always get an interpreter for all of these situations. For example, some conference organisers provide interpreters, but this usually only happens if the conference is targeted at deaf people or people with disabilities. Most general conferences do not automatically provide interpreters. If we want to attend a conference and interpreters have not been included in the conference planning, we have to ask the organisers to provide interpreters.

Another example is education. Universities and TAFE usually provide interpreters but private educational organisations usually do not. Schools also do not always provide interpreters.

Often we need to be very assertive and persistent before organisations will agree to provide interpreters. Not all Deaf people are confident and assertive, so many people miss out on doing things they would like to do.

For some situations we can get an interpreter and the service provider will pay for it but we have to wait a lot longer for the service than a hearing person does (e.g. Centrelink).

### **What can we get an interpreter for – if we pay?**

There are many situations where it is difficult or impossible to get an interpreter unless the Deaf person pays for the interpreter. Examples are:

- family and social occasions, e.g. weddings or funerals;
- children's activities, e.g. school visits, parent/teacher interviews, swimming lessons etc;
- purchasing goods and services or obtaining quotes;
- sporting activities;
- community meetings, public speeches or live theatre performances;
- emergencies, e.g. car accidents or roadside assistance;
- religious activities, e.g. church services or seminary lectures;
- non-job related education or hobby courses;
- many employment related situations – e.g. professional development training, meetings with clients;
- private hospitals;
- private legal e.g. solicitor;
- counselling, e.g. marriage counselling;
- financial advice and counselling.

For some of these situations, sometimes an interpreting agency will provide the interpreter free, e.g. most Deaf Societies will provide a free interpreter for funerals; some Deaf Societies will cover the cost of the interpreter for some kinds of counselling, e.g. domestic violence.

For some situations some organisations will sometimes pay for the interpreter, e.g. church services. Sometimes the "interpreter" provided by the organisation is not NAATI qualified, e.g. for parent/teacher interviews some schools will provide a staff "interpreter" who is a teacher's aide with some signing skills.

What we have to pay for, and what we can get free is different in each state, and even within states. For example, a Deaf person in a capital city might be able to get an interpreter free for a wedding, but if they live in a regional area in the same state and there is no local interpreter, they might have to pay for the interpreter.

Some individual interpreters will sometimes do some interpreting on a pro-bono (free) basis for things like private parties or for Deaf community events.

### **Supply of Auslan Interpreters**

The growing demand for interpreters is resulting in a shortage of supply, and this shortage seems to be getting worse. There are more interpreters now, but it is harder to get them. There have been changes in how interpreters are supplied. What we expect from interpreters is also changing.

We have tried to identify the issues that currently impact on supply of interpreters. These issues are not just about whether we can get an interpreter when we need one, and how we get one, but are also about things like the quality of the interpreters we get.

Many of the issues are inter-related and impact upon each other. Fixing some issues will

also help fix other issues, but the issues and inter-relationships are often complex. AAD has been saying for many years that a comprehensive big-picture research study needs to be done to “map” these issues and possible solutions, but so far government has only allocated funding to research projects into some parts of the big picture, not the whole.

## **Issues:**

### **1. Not enough interpreters.**

Clearly there are not enough interpreters to meet the demand. We have all had experiences of requesting an interpreter for an appointment and being told that one just cannot be found.

There are now more NAATI qualified interpreters than ever before, but still there are not enough to meet the demand. Part of the problem is that the number of full time interpreting jobs is limited; a lot of interpreting is done on a freelance or casual basis, and a lot of interpreting situations are seasonal – e.g. educational interpreting jobs are only available in school, TAFE and university term time. For this reason, a lot of qualified interpreters have other jobs and are only available for limited interpreting outside their normal working hours. Many industries are seasonal and people working in those industries adjust their financial management to fit the cash flow patterns of their industry, and there is a view that interpreters may need to learn to do this too.

The majority of interpreters are accredited at para-professional level (level 2) but because Deaf people’s skill levels and range of activities are increasing there is an increasing demand for interpreter level (level 3) interpreters. Often level 2 interpreters are supplied when a level 3 is needed but cannot be supplied. Is this acceptable? Many level 2 interpreters do have level 3 skills but have not sat a level 3 NAATI test for various reasons – e.g. cost of the test; there is not a big difference in pay rates between levels 2 and 3 and therefore not much incentive to get the higher accreditation; there is enough work available at level 2 at a good level of pay so not a lot of incentive to put in the effort and pay the fees to gain level 3 accreditation.

If there are not enough good interpreters available, should Deaf people accept any interpreter who is available? Putting aside the question of skill, there are other issues. In their presentation at the AAD conference in Adelaide in November 2006, Brita Regan and Peter Bonser pointed out that some interpreters’ benefit to Deaf people is questionable – e.g. they hold power over Deaf people, or are only in it for the money or because they feel sorry for Deaf people. But Deaf people often resort to using these interpreters because there are not enough interpreters available. Regan and Bonser questioned whether using such interpreters gives Deaf people the best outcome. Is it better to use these interpreters or is it better to go without?

Sometimes too, we resort to using non-accredited interpreters. Agencies who supply non-accredited interpreters usually claim that they only supply these interpreters if they are confident they have the skills for the assignment and/or if the interpreter is in training and will soon be sitting for a NAATI accreditation. But is this acceptable? Should we accept non-accredited interpreters, or should we go without?

## **2. Knowing where to go – do we know where to get an interpreter from?**

Until about 15 years ago, we all went to our state Deaf Society if we needed an interpreter. Now we can get an interpreter from many different organisations: Deaf Societies, NABS, private businesses set up by interpreters, and some general interpreting services (for all languages) eg VITS. Some government departments or agencies (e.g. Centrelink), universities and TAFE colleges, have their own lists of interpreters that they contact directly, or they have a “preferred supplier” arrangement and get their interpreters mostly from only one agency.

Depending on what we want an interpreter for, we often have to go to different agencies, e.g. if we want an interpreter for an appointment with our doctor, we contact NABS; if we are in a public hospital and we want an interpreter so we can communicate with the doctor, we ask the hospital to contact their interpreting supplier (which might be the Deaf Society, or it might be a private interpreting agency); if we have an accident late at night and are taken by ambulance to a public hospital emergency department, the hospital is supposed to contact the Deaf Society emergency interpreting service.

Is this confusing? Do you always know where to go or who to ask to get an interpreter?

Would it be better to go back to the old days and go to the Deaf Society for everything?

Some states have several agencies competing with each other to supply interpreters for the same appointment types. Other states still have basically only one supplier, the Deaf Society.

It is supposed to be a good thing to have competition because it is supposed to force suppliers to improve quality. But often the same interpreters work for many different agencies, so it does not matter much who supplies the interpreters, we still get the same interpreters. So is this competition between suppliers really improving quality of interpreting? Competition between suppliers also has other impacts, e.g. some suppliers charge less than others and/or pay interpreters more than others so it is easier to get interpreters for some situations than for others.

It is also supposed to be a good thing to have one central booking agency because this is supposed to make it easier and less confusing for us. But this means one agency has control over all aspects of our interpreting needs. Is it a good thing for one organisation to have so much say in our lives and so much control over who interprets for us and when?

In some states we can get an interpreter from a general interpreting agency – i.e. agencies that provide interpreters for all languages. These agencies usually do not know much about Auslan or the Deaf community, and they sometimes use unqualified or very new interpreters. We have also heard reports that unethical and unprofessional interpreters who cannot get work with the Auslan interpreting agencies are able to get work with these general interpreting agencies.

### **3. Choice – can we choose which interpreter we want? Do we get the interpreter we want?**

How much say do we have about who interprets for us?

When we go to a doctor or a dentist or a hairdresser etc, if we don't like the doctor/dentist/hairdresser, we don't have to go back again, we can go to a different doctor/dentist/hairdresser until we find one we like, and then we keep going back to that doctor/dentist/hairdresser.

Can we do this with interpreters?

We can do it sometimes with some agencies, e.g. NABS, but we cannot do it all the time with all agencies.

If we are booking the interpreter ourselves, sometimes we ask for a specific interpreter and the agency tells us the interpreter is not available at that time, so we can either accept a different interpreter or we can change our appointment time. Sometimes the agency will tell us who else is available at that time and we can choose which of these available interpreters we want, but this does not happen often. Sometimes the agency will confirm that they have booked the interpreter we want but on the day a different interpreter turns up for the appointment.

Agencies that have interpreters on staff usually assign their staff interpreters before they will look at their freelance list. This means that if we request an interpreter who is a freelance the agency will usually not assign that interpreter to us if there is a staff interpreter available. This is because (a) they have to pay the staff interpreter whether or not the interpreter is actually working on an interpreting assignment, and (b) freelance interpreters are paid more per hour than staff interpreters. The agency charges the service provider the same fee, whether the interpreter is staff or freelance, and it is cheaper for them to use staff interpreters than freelance.

Many agencies, especially the Deaf Societies, will not allow us to book an interpreter ourselves. They tell us that we must ask the service provider to make the booking for us. How do we have a say about who the interpreter is? We can ask the service provider to request a particular interpreter, but if that interpreter is not available it becomes difficult for us to have a say in the negotiations. Usually what happens is the agency decides which interpreter we will have. Is this appropriate? Should agencies contact us directly to negotiate who the interpreter will be? NABS does, and sometimes other agencies will, if we are very assertive and insist they do, but usually the Deaf person is expected to accept whoever the agency sends them.

Not all Deaf people are able to be fully independent and it may be appropriate for some agencies to decide which interpreter is most appropriate for their needs (e.g. a Deaf Society might provide other services to the person and may be aware of that person's situation and needs). But large numbers of Deaf people are quite independent and capable of making their own decisions. Should Deaf people have more say in which interpreters they get? How?

With the establishment of NABS and private interpreting agencies, a new issue has developed. It is becoming common now for some interpreters to "tout for service" – i.e.

they pressure the Deaf person to book them for their next appointment. This can be very uncomfortable and difficult for Deaf people if they are not happy with the interpreter and do not want to use them again.

#### **4. Booking an interpreter – is it easy to do? Can we do this ourselves? Do we know how interpreters are allocated to us?**

For most agencies, we need to fill out a booking form and fax or post it to the agency. Some have online booking forms. NABS is the only agency that will allow us to book an interpreter over the phone or by SMS. This is because NABS is free (the Australian Government pays) but other agencies need to know who is going to pay for the interpreter. Booking forms make it more complicated for everyone, and more difficult for some Deaf people to book interpreters themselves.

Usually we need to allow time when booking an interpreter, especially if we want the interpreter of our choice. The time we need to allow varies from one agency to another, but it is starting to increase, especially if we need a professional (level 3) interpreter. This is a problem for many situations, e.g. for job interviews or emergency meetings in the workplace. Deaf people often have to wait much longer than a hearing person would for some things, e.g. an interview at Centrelink, because of the long booking lead time required by agencies.

Deaf people are often asked to change their appointment time to suit the agency or interpreter availability. We might be willing to do this but it is not always easy for us or for the person(s) we are meeting with, and means that arranging appointments with anyone is complicated, frustrating and time consuming. Even if we change our appointment time the agency will often call close to the appointment time and say that they cannot supply an interpreter. So we have no option but to cancel the appointment because it is too late to contact another agency and fit in with *their* long advance booking time.

So how do we get an interpreter at short notice when we really need one? We are beginning to hear reports that NABS is able to find interpreters at short notice when other agencies cannot, and so NABS is beginning to supply interpreters for appointments that are not private health appointments. How can this be so? Is this because NABS pays interpreters more than other agencies do, so interpreters are more willing to work for NABS? Is it because the other agencies will only use their staff interpreters or a limited list of interpreters? Is it because NABS will use interpreters with a lower level of skills and/or ethics that other agencies will not employ? Or is there some other reason?

There is also the question of how interpreters are allocated to bookings. Even if we book a long time ahead and are allocated the interpreter of our choice, often between then and the actual appointment, the agency may receive another booking that has a higher priority in their procedures – e.g. if our interpreter is needed for a court case, he/she may be taken off our appointment and sent to the court appointment instead. Sometimes the agency will tell us this, but usually we turn up to our appointment and find a different interpreter is working with us.

If an agency does not assign us the interpreter we request, how do they decide which interpreter to allocate to us? Do they allocate the first available interpreter they can find? Do they contact friends or well-known interpreters first? It is known that many interpreters belong to the same church group; do staff responsible for allocating bookings assign

bookings to members of their church first? Or do they try to match the interpreter's skills to our needs? How do they know what our needs are? Do they have a profile of us on their system with relevant information about our language and skill level needs? How do they collect this information – is it information we have told them or do they work it out for themselves based on information that the interpreters who have worked with us give them?

## **5. Working conditions for interpreters – some impacts on the Deaf consumer.**

Interpreters are human and like the rest of us they need to be treated fairly. Fair pay, occupational health and safety and reasonable working conditions are as important for interpreters as for anyone else.

Most agencies now have similar working conditions for their interpreters, such as:

- for appointments of up to two hours, one interpreter can be booked but must be given a break after 1 hour;
- if breaks cannot be arranged then two interpreters must be booked if the appointment is longer than 1 hour;
- for appointments longer than two hours, two interpreters must be booked.

Since there is a shortage of interpreters, sometimes agencies will send only one interpreter for longer bookings. This means that either (a) the proceedings have to be stopped while the interpreter has a break every hour, or (b) the Deaf person has to miss out on proceedings while the interpreter is having a break. This can be embarrassing for Deaf people, reduce their access to information and equal participation, and inconvenient for the service provider.

Sometimes, despite the best of intentions, meetings run over time or lunch and tea breaks are shorter than planned. Some interpreters are flexible and do not mind having shorter breaks, especially when they are working in teams of two or more. But sometimes they are not willing to do this and complain, sometimes quite aggressively, to the Deaf person or to the service provider, about the demands upon them. This can be very embarrassing and awkward for the Deaf person.

There is also the question of who is responsible for ensuring interpreters have appropriate breaks. Some interpreters take this upon themselves as their own responsibility and remind the service provider or the Deaf person when they need a break. Some interpreters expect the Deaf person and the service provider to remember their needs, but not all Deaf people and service providers are consistent, sometimes they get involved in what is happening in the meeting and forget the interpreter's needs. Who should be responsible for ensuring interpreters have a break if and when they need it?

Almost all agencies have a policy of 2 hour minimum bookings. This means that if an appointment will only take, say half an hour, the person paying still has to pay for 2 hours of interpreting. From the interpreter's and the agency's point of view, this policy is reasonable especially if there is travel involved in the appointment; it is not reasonable to expect an interpreter to spend, say half an hour traveling to an appointment, half an hour at the appointment, and half an hour traveling back from the appointment if they are only being paid for half an hour's work. Video relay interpreting would help to solve this problem because it involves no traveling and should allow for people to book and pay for only the

time they actually use the interpreter.

The minimum 2 hour booking policy is notoriously abused by agencies and freelance interpreters. They insist that even if you only want the interpreter for half an hour you must pay for 2 hours. However, since you only need the interpreter for half an hour, they then assign the interpreter to another appointment after your half hour is finished – effectively charging twice for the interpreter’s time. For short bookings, would it be more fair to charge for the time we use an interpreter plus travel time rather than the minimum 2 hour booking fee?

## **6. Quality – are the interpreters we get qualified enough for the job and do a good job for us?**

Deaf people are now more aware of their rights to access services and to have competent interpreters, and more Deaf people now are gaining higher qualifications. This means that there is an increasing need for a higher level of skill and quality in interpreting. There are some excellent, highly skilled interpreters providing a very high quality service. However, their numbers are small and they tend to be in very high demand. There is a large pool of interpreters whose qualifications have not kept up with Deaf people’s skill level or expanding range of needs.

Also, the way people become interpreters has changed. In “the old days” interpreters were mostly CODAs (hearing Children of Deaf Adults) or people who had worked in the Deaf community in other jobs for a long time. They could sign fluently and were familiar with Deaf culture etc before they became interpreters. Nowadays, many interpreters have not previously been much involved with the Deaf community. Many people now go to TAFE to learn Auslan and then do a TAFE interpreter’s course; at the end of this course they automatically receive NAATI level 2 accreditation. Their Auslan skills might be good, but interpreting is not just about putting English words into Auslan signs and vice versa. It is also about such things as understanding cultural contexts and relaying the message in culturally appropriate ways. Can interpreters who have had little ongoing involvement in the Deaf community do this to an acceptable standard?

This raises the question for Deaf people: is any interpreter better than none? Is it better to have some access, however poor the quality of that access? If we continue to accept poor quality interpreting rather than have no access, how can we give interpreters incentives to improve their skills and qualifications?

If they do not regularly work with interpreters, hearing people are not always aware of what is good quality interpreting and what is not, so the responsibility for being assertive and insisting on good quality interpreting usually lies with Deaf people.

Even when interpreters have a good level of skill and qualification, they often do not have expertise or knowledge in more specialized areas, e.g. medical terms and conditions, technology, legal terms and the legal system.

There are not enough training programs for interpreters. Part of the problem is that TAFE colleges and universities usually require a minimum number of enrolments before they will allow a course to go ahead and it can be difficult to get enough enrolments. Even when courses are available the quality of the course is sometimes questionable. It is important that interpreter trainers themselves are adequately skilled and qualified, and this is not

always the case. One way to solve these problems may be for more nationally based courses using distance learning modules and employing only the most highly qualified trainers. All interpreters also need to have meaningful on-going involvement with the Deaf community, not just as an interpreter but as an active participant in the life of the community.

There also needs to be more professional development for interpreters. Some agencies provide this and require their interpreters to do a certain amount of professional development, but many do not. Agencies also do not usually consult with Deaf people on what type of professional development is needed, or involve them in this development.

### **7. Guarantee of supply – does the interpreter always turn up on time? What happens if your interpreter is sick on the day of your appointment?**

Sometimes because interpreters are human, bookings are cancelled at the last minute. Usually the booking agency will try and find a replacement interpreter, which often means the Deaf person gets an interpreter they do not know and have never worked with before, or prefer not to work with. Sometimes this works out well, sometimes it does not. Sometimes too the agency is not able to find a replacement, so the Deaf person has no option but to either cancel their appointment or attend it without an interpreter.

Because usually we have to book an interpreter a number of weeks ahead, if the agency cannot supply a replacement interpreter, Deaf people are sometimes in a situation of having to wait a very long time for important appointments. For example a booking for an appointment with Centrelink may need to be made 3 weeks in advance; if the interpreter is cancelled at the last minute, the Deaf person has to wait another 3 weeks for a new appointment, meaning that they have to wait for a total of 6 weeks.

Most agencies have a cancellation policy – i.e., if you cancel a booking within, say, 24 hours (for some agencies it is as long as three days) you still have to pay the full interpreting fee, or a percentage of it.

There is a view that if agencies are imposing this kind of cancellation fee then they have an obligation to guarantee that they will supply a suitable interpreter. It is not reasonable for them to demand a cancellation fee or the full fee if they do not also compensate the Deaf person when their interpreter cancels. Interpreters may lose pay if we cancel an appointment, but we also lose important things when the interpreter cancels. If interpreters and agencies expect to be compensated in this situation then Deaf people also should be compensated.

But there is no agency that provides this guarantee.

The different rates of pay from different agencies also has an effect on supply of interpreters: some interpreters cancel a job with one agency to do a job with a second agency because the second agency pays more. This situation has become more common since the establishment of NABS, which pays much higher rates to freelance interpreters than any other agency. It also appears to be enabling NABS to find interpreters at short notice when other agencies cannot. Does this actually benefit Deaf people? What is effectively happening is that some Deaf people are losing their interpreters to other Deaf people depending on which job is most lucrative for the interpreter.

## **8. Consumer input – do interpreters and suppliers consult with Deaf consumers?**

There is only one agency that provides any kind of regular forum for Deaf people to have input into how their interpreting service is provided, and this is limited to a reference group, with members chosen by the agency. Some agencies have regular or occasional “interpreting information sessions”, however these are not really about Deaf people having input into how the service is provided, they are more about the agency educating consumers on what is available and how to work with interpreters.

Interpreting services are organised as a business. The focus is on interpreters being paid enough to make a living and agencies making a profit. Quality of service is a secondary consideration. The Deaf point of view often is not the same as the agency’s or the interpreter’s point of view, and few if any agencies actively seek out the Deaf point of view.

Should there be some kind of forum for Deaf people to have their say? Should agencies be required to meet certain standards and practices? Who should develop these standards and practices? Who should monitor agencies’ compliance?

## **9. Cost**

Interpreters need to make a living. They have a right to expect a reasonable salary/fee for their skills. Different agencies and employers pay different rates.

Agencies need to cover their costs.

However, the charges for interpreting vary enormously. Different agencies charge different rates, and within the same agency the charges vary depending on the time of day; rates vary from around \$110 to \$270 for a minimum 2 hour booking for one interpreter. Only a portion of this is actually paid to the interpreter. The rest is retained by the agency. It does cost agencies money to run the service and these overheads, on top of the fee paid to the interpreter, need to be included in the fee charged; but some agencies appear to be charging rates much higher than is reasonable.

This inflates the true cost of interpreting and has various flow-on impacts on Deaf people. For example, if a Deaf person needs an interpreter for some work related activities their employer may be willing to pay for the interpreter if charges are reasonable, but cannot afford the high rates charged by agencies. Some assertive Deaf people are able to get around this problem by directly contacting freelance interpreters they know and asking them to accept bookings on a direct freelance basis which is much cheaper than the agency fees, but many Deaf people are not able to do this.

Some agencies, especially some of the Deaf Societies, do provide some free interpreting services for some situations, e.g. funerals, so there is some argument in favour of charging higher fees to cross-subsidise situations where they cannot charge a fee. However, many agencies do not provide free services but still charge very high fees – and they often cite the Deaf Societies’ high fees as justification for their own high fees.

Would Deaf people be better off if Deaf Societies stopped providing free services and instead charged lower rates for all interpreting, thus putting pressure on other agencies to also charge more reasonable rates?

Agencies also usually charge the same rate regardless of the interpreter's qualification level, but they often pay the interpreters different rates, i.e. they pay a para-professional (level 2) interpreter less than they pay a professional (level 3) but they charge the same rate for both. This also leads to a false impression of the high cost of interpreting.

Since the quality of interpreting varies between the different qualification levels, should agencies charge different rates for different qualification levels? Would this help give a more accurate picture of the true cost of interpreting? Would this help give interpreters an incentive to improve their qualifications and skills?

### **10. Complaints and regulation – if we are not happy with the interpreter, do we know how and where to complain? Do we feel confident and safe about complaining?**

Agencies usually have a process for clients to follow if they are not happy with the service. Usually a complaints process means we first let the interpreter know what we are not happy with and what we would like them to do to fix the problem. If the interpreter does not fix it, we then complain to their manager, and the manager is supposed to fix it, and so on. This is the general principle of all complaints processes.

Many Deaf people do not know how to complain and not all agencies actively inform Deaf consumers of their complaints process. Even if we do know how to complain, many Deaf people are not comfortable about complaining because usually the process means the interpreter is told who complained. Because the number of interpreters is small we often have to continue to work with the same interpreters and it can be difficult if they know we have made a complaint about them. It is especially difficult for Deaf people to complain about interpreting services in small cities and regions where there are only a few interpreters

There are also concerns that complaints are not always followed up and nothing is done about the problem. Since there is no regulation of interpreting services Deaf people have nowhere to take their complaints if the agency will not do anything about the problem.

There is also no standard system for monitoring interpreters' ethics and no way to enforce the code of ethics – it is up to the agencies to monitor their own interpreters' compliance with the code of ethics. But most interpreters work alone most of the time. How does the agency monitor their behaviour and compliance?

### **New ways of thinking**

There have been many changes to the level of demand for Auslan interpreting services, and the burden on supply seems to be increasing. In some ways there has also been a change in the way services are supplied, but this change has mainly been in the number of agencies providing interpreters and the number of organisations that have their own lists of interpreters for direct bookings for their own needs. The way in which people become interpreters has also changed.

Other than these changes, the way that services are supplied, and the issues and problems have remained largely the same, with some new issues emerging.

Perhaps it is time we all began thinking in new ways and came up with new models of

supply. The numbers of interpreters have increased, but most agencies use the same pool of interpreters so although the increased competition between agencies should mean an increase in quality and more competitive charges, this has not happened. Instead it has brought other problems.

We need to come up with more efficient and effective ways to use the interpreters we have; to provide training and professional development to improve numbers and quality; incentives for interpreters to continually upgrade their skills etc; and we need to do this without increasing costs – charges for interpreting are already too high. Deaf people need to be included in the process of developing new ways of thinking about and supplying interpreting. Their perspective has largely been excluded to date, and it is time to change this.

Many people believe that Video Remote Interpreting will provide a viable answer to many of the current problems, and AAD is continuing to try and find ways to bring video relay and interpreting services to the Australian Deaf community. But technology is not the only answer. Video Remote Interpreting is not suitable for all interpreting situations.

The Australian Government is beginning to recognise the need to fund interpreting services and has provided funding to set up NABS and the Auslan for Employment Program. However, there are many other areas of need that government has yet to address. Government also needs to understand the impact that these funding programs are having on other types of interpreting need, and the importance of a more co-ordinated approach to the whole interpreting matrix.

Agencies, interpreters, Deaf people, government and service providers who pay for interpreters need to work together to come up with workable solutions to the problems. AAD and ASLIA have agreed to organize a national summit during 2007 to try to get this discussion and co-operative working partnerships started and we hope it will be well supported and attended by all involved.

In the meantime, AAD wants to know about your experiences getting interpreters. Are there situations where you have not been able to get an interpreter? Why? Are there situations where you have only been able to get an interpreter if you paid for it? Are the interpreters who work with you qualified and skilled enough for your needs? And so on. Please go to the questionnaire and tell us about your experiences and your views.

## References:

Orima Research (for) Department of Family and Community Services, Supply and Demand for Auslan Interpreters across Australia, January 2004.

Regan, B. & Bonser, P., Choice, quality and professionalism: where have they gone? Presentation at the Australian Association of the Deaf National Conference: Auslan, our past, present and future, November 2006.

## Comments and feedback

AAD looks forward to receiving completed questionnaires. Please feel free to tell us about your experiences, your ideas, concerns and thoughts. You do not need to tell us your name.

Your feedback and comments are very important to us because we need to know what the Deaf community thinks so that we can represent you fairly when we lobby about these issues to government and service providers.

After receiving feedback from the community, we will prepare a summary of responses and a policy paper for the Australian Government. We will advise the Deaf community on the progress this discussion paper is making, in *AAD Outlook*.

### **The deadline for feedback is Friday 9 March 2007**

If you wish to provide feedback or ask questions, you can do one or more of the following:

1. Fill out the questionnaire form and fax to:

Karen Lloyd  
Manager  
Fax: 07 3357 8377

2. Fill out the questionnaire and post to (FREE POSTAGE):

Karen Lloyd  
Manager  
Australian Association of the Deaf Inc  
Reply Paid 1083  
STAFFORD QLD 4053

3. Electronically complete the form in Word format (it is available on the AAD website [www.aad.org.au](http://www.aad.org.au)) and email to:

Karen Lloyd  
Email: [karen.lloyd@aad.org.au](mailto:karen.lloyd@aad.org.au)

4. Attend a consultation workshop during February and early March 2007. See the AAD website [www.aad.org.au](http://www.aad.org.au) for dates and times.

Thank you!

Karen Lloyd  
AAD Manager