

# JOURNEYS IN AUDIOLOGY



BY  
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As I sit down to write about my career in audiology, I will be approaching my 67th birthday and remain active in my chosen profession. I still have a few years left in the tank and continue to enjoy what I do, so I hope to be around for some time yet.

So how did a budding biophysicist and instrumental scientist end up in audiology? Fortuitously, Field Rickards lectured on an audiology unit in my undergraduate degree. I also had in the back of my mind that “generalist” courses never really fit the bill, and one will eventually have to specialise in something.

After completing 44 years in the field, one can wonder if it was a good investment. Would I have been better off doing something else? For me, this career has been fulfilling. I have loved the technology, the ability to improve lives, and it has given me a sense of worth. It still gives me a buzz.

## THE GOVERNMENT SECTOR

In the late 1980s most audiologists worked at the National Acoustic Laboratories (NAL), now known as Hearing Australia (HA), and it had a monopoly on providing hearing services. To get an edge many studied further. I completed a Post Graduate Diploma in Health Administration, which I found very “balancing” in my outlook on the work environment.

I was one of the inaugural Adult Specialists and, after seven years, moved on to a Hearing Centre Management role. The Adult Specialist role was really a gift, as you were relatively free to be creative. During this time, I developed internally the “Teletalk”, the “Simplified Aid Manipulation Index” (SAMI), the “Hearing Aid Exercise Chart”, “Shuttletrac” and the “General Adaptation to Loudness Test” (GALT), all the time supported by the wonderfully

talented Geoff Plant who kindly shared a publication with me in the AJA.

It was during this time that I discovered that I was not the best advocate for my own ideas. Things seemed to go better when others did so in disguise. I recall lovingly crafting a booklet, “How to Hear on the Telephone”, hand drawing the images myself with a pencil. Years later it was rediscovered and converted into a brochure by another, more talented audiologist. I also struggled to get traction on my suggestions for my employer to adopt “Hear for Life” as its motto and consider centralised battery dispatch. These were adopted by my next employer, National Hearing Centres, in 1998 within two weeks. The motto then seemed to spawn dozens of variations over the years, as it has so many wonderful connotations. Having learned this surrogate method of advocacy, I can reveal here that there exist numerous other ideas that I’ll be taking to the grave out of respect to my co-conspirators.

I did enjoy my time at NAL as a manager. I introduced “Clinical Development Teams” at my clinic and

advocated the first Paediatric and Adult Specialist study programs that were eventually formalised. I had fun inventing “The Bullsheets”, which was an internal broadsheet designed initially to be funny and lift spirits in our organisation.

One of my early career frustrations was that audiology was thought of as a technician job. I had an idea and entered a pact with Peter Cichello. On the same day, we dusted off our degrees and boldly hung them in our offices. We also agreed to sign with our qualifications, which at the time was the exclusive domain of the medical profession. One senior audiologist just guffawed at us for being so pretentious, but Peter and I had the last laugh: by the end of that year everyone had followed suit and this was a small turning point in professional pride. Today, we are fortunate that our profession is well known and understood by the community and the need to self-promote with mounted degrees is less of an imperative. Although it has taken time, Audiology Australia has done an excellent job in promoting the profession.



*Above/ Ian Tyson presenting my Australia Day Achievement Medallion as part of the NAL CAM systems redevelopment (1997).*



*Above/ Speaking at the Wimmera Hearing Society's Roses Gap Camp for HI Children and Families.*

I remember once we could not even get Yellow Pages to create a category for "Audiology".

### THE PRIVATE SECTOR

After spending a year on a project about the HSP Voucher Scheme, I didn't really want to go back to my job as Hearing Centre Manager. My classmate and boss, Ian Tyson, kindly suggested I consider a redundancy package. Ian, I think, knew my heart and soul were really with the private sector. He gave me the courage to move on. I powered on and helped build a fledgling provider into a juggernaut that became a leader in the industry. National Hearing Centres (NHC) was to become one of the most profitable hearing care businesses in the world and an industry benchmark.

National Hearing Centers was perhaps the toughest gig I ever experienced, and I worked there as the Chief Audiologist for 11 years. They broke the traditional mould by re-tasking their tele-marketing model toward the Hearing Services Program. It would be an understatement to say that NHC was broadly disliked by its competitors who, as if as a badge of honor, vowed not to tele-market, ever. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. Fast forward to today and nearly all large providers have their own call centres. I suppose in the end, in the corporate world, growth and profitability are king. The private sector can also be ruthless. One employer terminated my wife's employment with them on learning we were dating, presumably due to corporate

knowledge concerns and not just for poor taste! As the male in this equation there was never any suggestion from my employer that I disassociate, even though I held much more sensitive business knowledge. So why is it still that women pay the price?

### PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

I spent 13 years as a Federal Councillor with Audiology Australia (AudA) from about 1998 and was concurrently a State Branch President for four years. These were exciting times with the new competitive voucher market in play, salaries soaring and a desperate need to find more audiologists.

The shortage of audiologists was compounded by the conversion of the Post Graduate Diploma to a Masters-level qualification creating a gulf in the availability of practitioners. This kick-started my travels to India in 2003 and 2005, recruiting around 50 audiologists directly, with many more to follow. These adventurous individuals provided a much-needed fillip. Most became Australian citizens, and many distinguished themselves by advancing to very senior roles in the industry.

The antiquated Clinical Certification process was a major barrier to business. I proposed a shorter one-year provisional audiologist period, instead of two, and a cascading supervision model that through the auspices of myself, Kerrie Lee and Kate Champion was adopted by AudA. This was a boon to business and provided clients with much needed access to

see an audiologist in regions with few services. It is self-evident that no harm had been done to professional development, which is as robust as it ever was.

In other respects, I see the period of 1998 to 2008 as our profession's lost decade. Audiology Australia was preoccupied with the Voucher Scheme and it lost sight of other emerging fields that we deserved to lead. For example, I felt at the time that we lost a natural leadership position in the emerging field of Auditory Processing Disorders. Nonetheless a lot was achieved where it was needed most at the time.

I have found audiology to be personally rewarding and at times the politics have been challenging. The scale of challenges gets bigger each year, from as small as a Yellow Pages listing to the government policy direction in hearing services. I think the skill shift at Audiology Australia toward marketing our brand and lobbying government is welcome but may require further investment in the years to come.

For me, I am glad I took the path to audiology rather than remain as a biophysicist. I don't think I'd have had anything like the excitement and adventure I have experienced in audiology. For those contemplating a career or just starting out, be bold and don't be shy to switch fields now and then. It really will not affect your advancement or seniority in an organisation but it will make you an asset to any future employer.

If we are to seize the future, we need to make some serious changes and not worry so much about seeking the approval of others before marching forward. Let's forge our own agenda. ●



*Above/ A quick trip to the Taj Mahal during a recruiting tour to Delhi, circa 2005.*