Case Report

Case number: 0309-25
Advertiser: Hearing Australia
Medium: Outdoor
Decision date: 14-Jan-2026
Decision: Breach
Action: Ad modified

ISSUES CONSIDERED BY THE COMMUNITY PANEL

- AANA Code of Ethics - 2.1 Discrimination or Vilification - breach

AD DESCRIPTION

This outdoor poster ad features the claims 'When sound fades, you fade' and 'Hearing loss is linked to a 32% higher risk of developing dementia. It encourages people to book a 15-minute hearing check.

SUMMARY

Complaint

A complaint was received on the grounds that the language used in the advertisement was inconsistent with contemporary understanding of deaf culture. While the visual context of the

advertisement may intend to reference industrial hearing loss, the accompanying wording implies that deaf individuals are 'broken', 'faded', or otherwise diminished. This messaging is harmful and misrepresents deaf identity.

Deaf people do not consider themselves impaired versions of hearing people; many do not seek or desire to be 'fixed' and instead recognise deafness as a cultural and linguistic difference rather than a deficit. The deaf community is diverse. Some families have no known genetic cause for deafness, while others have extensive and proud deaf heritage. Regardless of background, deaf people form a vibrant, resilient, and culturally rich community with its own language, identity, and worldview.

This ad vilifies and demeans people based on their disability with the suggestion that they 'fade', insinuating some sort of personal decline, or a need to be 'fixed' in some way.

Advertiser response

The advertiser responded that this ad is part of a broader pilot campaign to raise awareness of the potential impact of untreated hearing loss. It is designed to motivate a person with hearing loss to take action and have their hearing tested, given the potentially serious impact it could have on their health and wellbeing. The intent is to promote awareness of the health risks associated with untreated hearing loss, not to diminish or devalue any community.

The ad is targeted at adults at higher risk (over the age of 55 with industrial or age-related hearing loss) to alert them to the potential risks associated of untreated hearing loss and dementia. It is, in no way, targeted at the profoundly deaf community and makes no reference to those with profound hearing loss. The ad was compiled after consultation with a small group of individuals who meet these criteria and is grounded in research around the topic.

While the advertiser does not believe that the ad vilifies people with disabilities, it will take the complainant's comments into considerations for future campaigns.

A copy of the advertiser's complete response is included as Appendix A.

Decisions

The Panel found that the ad was in breach of section 2.1 of the AANA Code of Ethics, as the ad presented a disability in a manner that could be considered humiliating.

ASSESSMENT AND DECISIONS

Section 2.1 (AANA Code of Ethics): Advertising shall not portray people or depict material in a way which discriminates against or vilifies a person or section of the community on account of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, disability, mental illness or political belief.

The Practice Note states:

> Section 2.1 prohibits the discrimination or vilification of any individual or group of people on the basis of certain defined attributes. 'Discrimination' and 'Vilification' are defined as:

Discrimination: unfair or less favourable treatment

Vilification: Humiliates, intimidates, incites hatred, contempt or ridicule

A realistic depiction of people with a disability can be acceptable, even if the advertisement may be upsetting to some members of the community, where there is an important message being delivered.

Panel assessment

The Panel acknowledges that the ad is intended to reach people who might benefit from having their hearing checked and encourages them to seek early intervention. The Panel considered, however, that the reference to 'fade' could carry different connotations, depending on the viewer's perspective and circumstances.

The minority of the Panel considered that the term is meant to represent the feeling of 'fading' into the background because loss of hearing makes it harder to participate in social events and family gatherings. The minority of the Panel also considered that hearing loss is a real concern in industries like construction. In this context, the minority of the Panel considered that the term was appropriate and should not be considered to be discriminatory of deaf people.

However, the majority of the Panel considered that the overall communication was that once your hearing 'fades' you as a person 'fade' in a manner that suggests you are 'less than complete' as a person. The majority of the Panel considered that this could be considered to be discriminatory and humiliating.

The majority of the Panel also considered that the advertiser only appears to have consulted older adults who have experienced hearing loss but have not yet sought help. The Panel considered that this may have inadvertently excluded the deaf community and any sensitivity around the suggestion that people 'fade' as a consequence of their impairment.

The Panel, therefore, found that this ad portrayed deaf people as incomplete somehow, which amounts to an unfair and humiliating depiction of the deaf community in a manner that was inconsistent with community standards on disabilities.

Panel decision

The Panel found that the ad breached section 2.1 of the AANA Code of Ethics.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The Panel found that the ad did not breach any other section of the advertising codes.

ACTION

Hearing Australia note the Community Panel's decision on case 0309-25 and, while Hearing Australia does not agree with the assessment, we respect the process and will modify the advertisement in accordance with the Panel's finding.

This campaign was developed to raise awareness in older adults of the health impacts of *untreated* hearing loss and to encourage early hearing checks as a preventative health

measure. Our intent has always been to support adults to take proactive steps for their wellbeing, not to diminish or devalue the Deaf community.

We remain committed to promoting this important health message. However, we will discontinue the use of the tagline *"When sound fades, you fade"* in future advertising campaigns.

We understand that Ads Standards will now publish the final case report on their website, including Hearing Australia's response to the Panel's decision, under the heading of *"Complaint Upheld – Advertising Modified/Discontinued"*.

APPENDIX A: ADVERTISER RESPONSE IN FULL

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this complaint.

Hearing Australia is a Commonwealth government entity that, together with our research division, the National Acoustic Laboratories (NAL), has helped over two million children and adults with hearing loss since 1947.

We deliver hearing assessments, hearing devices and follow-up care through a national network of centres and via home visits, telehealth and an extensive outreach program to regional and remote communities.

In 2024–25 we helped over 260,000 children and adults and achieved client satisfaction rates of 86 per cent.

Our clinicians undertake extensive training and continuous professional development aligned with Audiology Australia's CPD framework, supported by specialised internal programs.

We also recognise the diversity and richness of the Deaf community and strive to support children and adults who are deaf with tailored clinical services.

We appreciate the feedback and acknowledge the importance of respectful representation of the Deaf community.

The following information provides further details regarding the advertisement and we would be happy to provide additional information if it was useful.

1. Description of the Advertisement
The advertisement is an outdoor static display located in a bus stop in Grenfell Street, Adelaide in South Australia. It features an image of a man in industrial clothing, accompanied by Hearing Australia branding and contact details. The advertisement states "When sound fades, you fade." It then states that "Hearing loss is linked to a 32% higher risk of developing dementia", with a reference to the relevant research, and closes with a statement that "Your hearing matters" with information about how to contact Hearing Australia.

This particular advertisement is part of a broader pilot campaign to raise awareness of the potential impact of untreated hearing loss. It is designed to motivate a person with hearing loss to take action and have their hearing tested, given the potentially serious impact it could have on their health and wellbeing.

2. Acknowledgment of Concerns
As mentioned above, we acknowledge and respect the concerns raised by the complainant regarding the language used in the advertisement.
We do not, however, consider that it implies that Deaf individuals are "broken", "faded" or "diminished" for the reasons outlined below.

3. Our Approach and Intent
Our intent is to promote awareness of the health risks associated with untreated hearing loss, not to diminish or devalue any community.

One of Hearing Australia's functions is to raise awareness of the impact of hearing loss and to support people get help if they have hearing problems.

As a result, this advertisement is targeted at adults at higher risk (over the age of 55 with industrial or age-related hearing loss) to alert them to the potential risks associated of untreated hearing loss and dementia.

It is, in no way, targeted at the profoundly deaf community and makes no reference to those with profound hearing loss.

The advertisement is grounded in extensive research that has showing that untreated hearing loss is associated with a 32 per cent higher risk of developing dementia [1], an increased risk of loneliness and a twofold increase in the risk of a serious fall [2]. This evidence provides important context for the use of the term 'fade'.

Additionally, we know that, on average, adults with mild to moderate hearing loss wait around seven years before seeking help from a hearing professional [3].

The advertisement and the broader pilot campaign are designed to reach people who recognise they have hearing loss but have not yet sought support or treatment. Based on the data, we believe this represents an important community message and a clear call to action.

4. Message testing with people with hearing loss

The development of this advertisement, along with other key messaging in the pilot campaign, was informed by consultation with a small focus group of adults with hearing loss who had not yet sought help.

This process involved testing various themes and messages. The message featured in the advertisement was considered by the group to be both acceptable and effective.

Findings from Hearing Australia's research arm, the National Acoustic Laboratories (NAL), also informed wording choices and helped verify the research referred to in the advertisement.

5. Response to AANA Code of Ethics Sections 2.1–2.7

2.1Discrimination or Vilification: For these reasons, we do not consider that the advertisement vilifies or demeans any individual or group. In particular, the relevant AANA Code of Ethics practice note defines discrimination as "unfair or less favourable treatment" and vilification as "humiliates, intimidates incites hatred, contempt and ridicule". We do not consider the advertisement meets either definition.

Furthermore, the practice note states that, in relation to disability, "a realistic depiction of people with a disability can be acceptable, even if the advertisement may be upsetting to some members of the community, where there is an important message being delivered".

That said, we acknowledge that the wording, if taken out of context, could appear confronting to people with significant hearing loss. We will take this into account as part of our broader campaign assessment.

2.2 Exploitative or Degrading: We do not believe the advertisement is in any way exploitative or degrading of any individual or group.
2.3 Violence: There is no violent content or imagery included in the advertisement.
2.4 Sex, Sexuality and Nudity: There is no sex, sexuality or nudity in the advertisement.
2.5 Language: There is no strong or obscene language in the advertisement and the wording in the advertisement is appropriate for the circumstances and intent of the messaging.
2.6 Health and Safety: The advertisement does not promote unhealthy or unsafe behaviour but rather encourages people with hearing loss to take action to avoid the potential risks of dementia.
2.7 Distinguishable as Advertising: The advertisement is clearly branded and identifiable as Hearing Australia advertising.
We have reviewed the advertisement against the AANA Code of Ethics and it is our position that our advertisement complies with all relevant provisions, including Sections 2.1–2.7."

6. Assurance and Next Steps
We wish to close by assuring the Community Panel that Hearing Australia remains committed to ethical advertising and takes its responsibilities as a Commonwealth entity extremely seriously along with its responsibilities to people with hearing loss, including those that are Deaf.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to respond. Please contact us if further information is required.

[1] Readman, M. R., Littlejohn, J., Dodd, I., Rhodes, S., Wareing, L., Polden, M., ... Giebel, C. (2025). Hearing loss as a risk factor
for dementia: a systematic review and meta-analysis from a global perspective. Aging & Mental Health, 29(10), 1831–1844.
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13607863.2025.2515180

[2] Goman, A. M., Tan, N., Pike, J. R., et al. (2025). Effects of hearing intervention on falls in older adults: findings from a
secondary analysis of the ACHIEVE randomised controlled trial. The Lancet Public Health, 10:6 e492-e50. doi: 10.1016/S2468
2667(25)00088-X Accessed 22/10/25 at
https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(25)00088X/fulltext

[3] Simpson AN, Matthews LJ, Cassarly C, Dubno JR. Time From Hearing Aid Candidacy to Hearing Aid Adoption: A
Longitudinal Cohort Study. Ear Hear. 2019 May/Jun;40(3):468-476. doi: 10.1097/AUD.0000000000000641. PMID:
30085938; PMCID: PMC6363915.