

New Trial Uses Internet To Connect Rural Families With Specialist Hearing Services

Oticon celebrates 10th anniversary with donation to help first Australian rollout of new hearing assessment services project for rural communities

Celebrating its 10th Anniversary in Australia, Oticon, the Copenhagen-based world leader in technology aids for the hearing impaired, today announced details of a donation that will help to provide rural Australian families with access to specialist hearing assessment services. The A\$10,000.00 donation will assist the first Australian trial of a remote audiology diagnostic project, that seeks to provide rural families with greater access to health services using advanced telecommunications, videoconferencing and internet technologies. Initially, the trial will be rolled out to several rural communities in New South Wales and may later be adapted for other Australian regions. The project is also being watched closely by several South East Asian countries. More than 1.9 million adults and children in Australia suffer some form of hearing loss, including more than one child in every 30 aged between two and twelve. The early identification and treatment of hearing loss is proven to greatly reduce the ongoing social, physical and financial burdens placed on families, and the wider community. Remote audiology testing across the internet allows specialists to assess hearing loss from offsite locations and following diagnosis, link families with appropriate medical and support services, quickly. Using videoconferencing, the service can also be used to provide training and information consultations. Oticon Australia's managing director, Mr Niels Toxaerd, said the project provides a major step forward in accurately diagnosing hearing loss in rural communities and helping people access necessary treatment and support services. "By using advanced technologies to bring specialist assessment services closer to peoples homes, the trial helps Australian families to accurately diagnose hearing loss sooner and through early treatment, help them to overcome the many barriers they may face. "For instance, early identification of hearing loss in babies will help these little people to develop normal speech recognition and language understanding, and will help them to achieve during formative schooling years. For parents, easier access to specialist services will help families to adjust faster, greatly improve communication and decrease financial burdens," he said. In results published in a recent overseas study conducted by the University of Colorado, more than 80 per cent of infants with hearing loss detected at birth went on to achieve normal language skills by the age of five. Infants who were not screened had only a 32 per cent chance of attaining normal language skills. "Oticon has a proud history of technical innovation in Australia and we are very pleased to be associated with a project that is using cutting-edge technology to help put people first in rural communities," Toxaerd said. Leading the new project is Kirsty Gardner-Berry an Audiologist with the Sydney Diagnostic Audiology Centre. "Through the support of companies like Oticon, this project will help families in rural communities have much better access to specialist hearing services and faster access to treatment if needed," Ms Gardner-Berry said. "The longer-term success of this project should emphasise the value of using new technologies to deliver more health services to rural areas while reducing the overall cost of doing so." Project details: The project seeks to prove that by using advanced internet technologies, families in rural centres can have timely access to important health services, such as audiology assessment services. The trial will enable an audiology specialist to link up with people in rural communities via internet-connected diagnostic machines and videoconferencing, enabling accurate remote assessments and ensuring families can openly discuss any issues with the audiologist in real-time. The rural sites simply require access to a diagnostic machine, a laptop computer with internet camera and a trained operator - who may be someone like a community nurse or staff at a medical centre. The remote audiologist may be based anywhere with high speed internet access. More information about the project is available on request. Oticon Australia - a history of technical innovation in hearing instruments 1993 Began operations in Australia 1995 Introduced the first digital hearing aid - DigiFocus - to the Australian market 2002 Introduced Adaption, the world's first voice-activated digital hearing aid to Australia 2002 Delivered the Adaption Power, an aid for people with significant hearing loss 2002 Supported the opening of the new Shepherd Family Hearing Centre in South Western Sydney 2003 10th Anniversary in Australia / Donation of \$10,000.00 to support rural audiology project ends Notes to Editors Oticon's vision is to help people with impaired hearing live life as they wish, with the hearing ability they have. Accordingly, Oticon collaborates with hearing care professionals throughout the world and sells its products through sales subsidiaries in 21 countries, including Australia, and through some 80 independent distributors worldwide. Oticon is a 100 per cent-owned part of the Copenhagen Stock Exchange-listed William Demant Holding Group of international companies. While the bulk of the Group's business is in Europe and North America, Asia and the Pacific Rim countries, including Australia, accounted for 15 per cent of revenues in 2002. Visit www.oticon.com.au The head office of Oticon Australia Pty Ltd is at 34 Charles Street, Parramatta, NSW 2150.