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A Baby's Cry for Hearing Help!

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I'm a baby who has just been born.
That was some tough passage, but hey, I'm here and breathing. Well, I'm pretty sure I'm breathing, because I've been poked, handled and stared at closely for that Apgar thing that checks my: appearance, do I have a pulse, do I grimace, am I moving and finally, am I breathing. Yay, I got a good score!
Ow, ow! Somebody just stuck me in the heel and took a bit of red stuff.
I guess that means the hearing thing is coming next.
Waiting... waiting... Hey! It's been days – where's my hearing test?
Oh, I'm a ***Canadian*** *baby?*
Oh. Damn.
Well, let's hope I don't have any hearing loss, because they may not find it for a couple of years. Will that be too late? I don't want to fall behind the other babies.
But if I am deaf… how can I let my mommy-daddy-people know that? If I blink my eyes at them, they'll just think I'm cute.
Hey, HEY! Where's my hearing screening?! It's not my fault I wasn't born in Ontario or British Columbia or the US or somewhere where ALL the babies get screened.

According to the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), currently more than 95 percent of all American newborns are screened for hearing loss shortly after birth.

But in Canada, we're not doing so well, according to Speech-Language & Audiology Canada (SAC), Canada has no national mandate for Universal Newborn Hearing Screening, and health programs are generally the domain of individual provinces and territories. In a January 2016 report from SAC that grades the provincial newborn screening programs, only one – British Columbia – gets an "Excellent". Four provinces get a "Good," seven are graded "Insufficient," and one is "Under Review."

This is simply not good enough. Babies are falling through the cracks in not having screening that identifies a potential hearing loss that will affect every aspect of their life going forward.

But even when babies *are* identified as deaf or having hearing loss, what then? Only a few provinces provide adequate interventions from audiologists and other health professionals, including hearing technology and language development programs.

At some point, babies grow up. Hearing aids become the financial responsibility of the family. The baby who becomes a big person is on its own and in Canada, there is little financial support for the crucial hearing technology that helps people with hearing loss to hear. Many American adults have the same problem.

In a country like Canada which prides itself on universal health care – a system I generally applaud and appreciate, having experienced the superb care members of my family have received at all stages of life – this is not acceptable.

I was born long before newborn hearing screening was 'a thing'. My mother, a nurse, recognized something was going on with her 2-year-old daughter; pediatric testing revealed a congenital hearing loss of unknown cause, which progressed from mild in childhood to severe to profound in adulthood. I received no intervention services – the doctors said no – except for the excellent communication skills drummed into me by my parents. I finally bought my first hearing aid at age 21.

Since becoming involved with hearing loss advocacy, however, I have met many people whose childhood hearing loss was severe – which meant struggling through a system that didn't meet their needs and which have left them with invisible, psychological scars. Visits to the ear doctor or surgical interventions were covered by the system, but nothing else. No technology or speech and language development supports and, today, in many geographical areas, not much has changed. Yet, today we *have* the knowledge, the technology, and the screenings that could change this scenario, and still, too many of our babies-who-become-big-people aren't getting the services and support they need.

Why is hearing loss ranked so lowly on the list of things that governments support? Because we don't usually die from it? Because it doesn't cripple us with pain? (Trust me, there are many types of pain.) Maybe because it's not visible and we seem to be doing OK? Or because hearing technology and services put financial burden on governments already sinking under the weight of the provision of essential health care?

It's time for Canada to implement a national standard of newborn hearing screening because the cost of *not* doing so is far greater.

The Hearing Foundation of Canada, supported by CAA, recently conducted a national petition (tinyears.ca) and MP Peter Julian present it to the Canadian government at the close of Better Speech & Hearing Month.

Were petitioners wasting their time in signing the petition? Was Peter Julian wasting his breath?

I hope not.

This article appeared in a different form in HearingHealthMatters.org.