

World Health Organization and Its Initiative for Ear and Hearing Care



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KEYWORDS

- Global hearing • Hearing loss • Ear and hearing care • Prevention of deafness
- Hearing loss prevention • World hearing day • World Health Association resolution

KEY POINTS

- The World Health Organization (WHO) is the United Nations' specialized agency in the field of health.
- WHO addresses ear and hearing problems through its program for prevention of deafness and hearing loss.
- The World Health Assembly recently adopted a resolution highlighting the need for global and national action to deal with hearing loss.
- Based on this resolution, WHO has identified 4 key strategic work areas for the coming 5 years.
- WHO calls upon all stakeholders, including ear and hearing care professionals, to come together in order to drive global action for hearing loss.

INTRODUCTION

As the global leader in the field of public health, the World Health Organization (WHO) addresses health issues that are prioritized by its Member States^a. These include a diverse variety of areas addressing infections such as malaria, tuberculosis, polio, and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS); reducing mortality and morbidity due to conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer; promoting road safety, violence prevention; and many more areas.¹ The issues that are included in WHO's program of work are typically those that have been highlighted as public health issues

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^a Member State refers to the 194 countries that are members of the United Nations system.

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of global importance based on their prevalence, impact, and prioritization by governments and civil society groups.

Relevant to the field of otolaryngology, hearing loss has been prioritized in consequence of its rising prevalence and the importance of hearing as a contributor toward optimal health in all ages. WHO initiated a program for prevention of deafness and hearing loss in the late 1990s to address hearing loss and ear diseases that lead to it. This program has gradually evolved over the last 20 years and recently been strengthened by a newly adopted World Health Assembly resolution. The program is driving a multistakeholder global effort to make ear and hearing care accessible for all people across different regions and income settings. This article summarizes the role that WHO plays in global health, while outlining specifically its strategies for addressing ear problems and hearing loss. It also looks at the importance of coordinated multi-stakeholder global action and makes suggestions about how all professionals can contribute toward this effort.

THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

WHO was established in the aftermath of World War II as the United Nations' specialized agency in the field of health.¹ As the world's directing and coordinating authority on international health, WHO aims to build a better, healthier future for people all over the world. To achieve the sustainable development goal for health: *Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being*, WHO has identified 6 priority areas for action. These are

- Advancing universal health coverage: enabling countries to sustain or expand access to all needed health services and financial protection, and promoting universal health coverage
- Achieving health-related development goals: addressing unfinished and future challenges relating to maternal and child health; combating HIV, malaria, tuberculosis; and completing the eradication of polio and several neglected tropical diseases
- Addressing the challenge of noncommunicable diseases and mental health, violence, and injuries and disabilities
- Ensuring that all countries can detect and respond to acute public health threats under the international health regulations
- Increasing access to quality, safe, efficacious, and affordable medical products (medicines, vaccines, diagnostics, and other health technologies)
- Addressing the social, economic, and environmental determinants of health as a means to promote health outcomes and reduce health inequalities within and between countries

WHO works in close collaboration with the ministries of health of its 194 member states, that is, countries that are part of the United Nations. The headquarters of WHO works closely with its 6 regional offices and over 150 country offices alongside the national governments to ensure the implementation of its ambitious agenda.

The ministries of health of national governments are a key part of the World Health Assembly, which is the supreme decision-making body in global health and guides WHO's agenda and work. Besides governments, WHO partners with many professional, nongovernmental, and civil society organizations and draws upon the knowledge and resources of a large body of experts to guide it in the development of evidence-based policies and recommendations.

HEARING LOSS: CAUSE FOR CONCERN

In 1995, the World Health Assembly discussed the issue of the rising prevalence of hearing loss across the world and highlighted the need to address this as a public

health issue through the primary health care systems of countries. A resolution for prevention of hearing impairment was adopted (WHA 48.9, 1995) that outlined actions for countries and WHO to undertake to address this issue.² Over the years that followed this resolution, WHO developed materials, resources, and guidelines to support countries in its implementation.

Despite this, only 32 member states reported setting up national strategies and plans to address ear diseases and hearing loss³ (Fig. 1).

Meanwhile, disabling hearing loss was estimated to now affect over 5% of the world's population and be a leading contributor to morbidity globally (estimated by calculating disability-adjusted life years [DALYs] and years lived with disability [YLDs]).^{4,5} A recent report also confirmed that unaddressed hearing loss poses a high financial cost, with an estimated \$750 billion being lost annually.⁶

Concern is also raised about the increasing prevalence and impact of hearing loss. In 2015, WHO estimated that over 1 billion young people are at risk of hearing loss because of the way they listen to music.⁷ Also, there is a significant demographic shift, with an increasing number of older adults globally, a third of whom are likely to have hearing loss requiring interventions.⁸

SOLUTIONS EXIST

Analyzing the etiology of hearing loss reveals that many of its causes are preventable. As a matter of fact, 60% of hearing loss cases in children are attributed to preventable causes that include ear infections, infectious diseases such as rubella and meningitis, birth-related complications, noise exposure, and ototoxicity.⁹ Studies also show that when hearing loss occurs, early intervention programs for timely identification and rehabilitation can mitigate its adverse impact and are cost-effective to implement⁶ (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Map showing existence of government-initiated national/subnational plan for ear and hearing care. (From Chestnov O, Mendis M, Chadha S, et al. Multicountry assessment of national capacity to provide hearing care. Geneva (Switzerland): World Health Organization (WHO). 2013. Available at: http://www.who.int/pbd/publications/WHOReportHearingCare_Englishweb.pdf. Accessed July 31, 2017; with permission.)

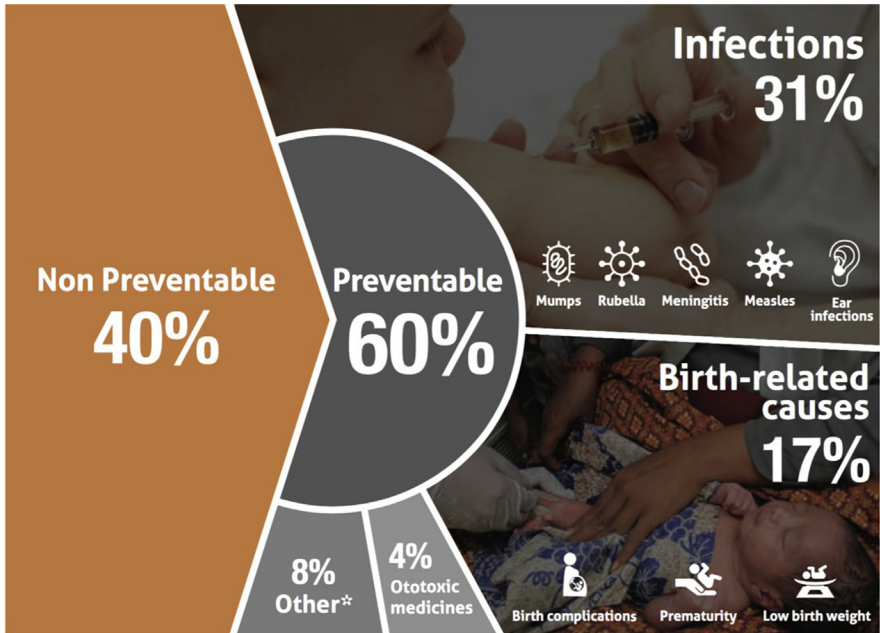


Fig. 2. Distribution of preventable causes of childhood hearing loss. (From Krug E, Chadha S, Sminkey L, et al. Childhood hearing loss: strategies for prevention and care. World Health Organization (WHO). 2016. Available at: http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/204632/1/9789241510325_eng.pdf?ua=1. Accessed July 31, 2017; with permission.)

What is required is a public health approach toward this subject. Such an approach should include population-based strategies such as health promotion, disease prevention, and epidemiologic surveillance. This approach must focus on policy development, implementation, and monitoring of multi-stakeholder action.

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION ACTIONS IN THE FIELD OF HEARING LOSS

Over the last few years, WHO has been working to promote ear and hearing care in its member states. The term ear and hearing care refers to comprehensive, evidence-based interventions to prevent, identify, and treat ear diseases and hearing loss, and to habilitate or rehabilitate and support persons with hearing loss through the health system.¹⁰ In order to do so, it has focused on evidence-based advocacy with the aim of raising awareness on this issue among policy makers, professionals, and civil society. It has also worked to provide guidance to countries, through resource materials and technical inputs, for development, implementation, and monitoring of national strategies to make ear and hearing care accessible for all.

Advocacy efforts of WHO in this field have centered around the World Hearing Day, which is observed on March 3. Since 2013, WHO has proposed the theme and supported this with evidence-based messages and advocacy materials targeting policy-makers, professionals, and civil society. Many countries and partner organizations, as well as individuals have joined this advocacy effort by organizing a variety of activities, sharing materials and engaging with media.¹¹

It is important that raised awareness is translated into policy and action at country and community levels. In order to catalyze this, WHO has organized numerous

consultations in its different regions. Such consultations often engage with ministries of health and bring them together with professionals, academics, and civil society networks from different countries. This provides an opportunity for sensitizing all stakeholders on the principles of ear and hearing care, while facilitating the exchange of ideas and networking. In recent years, the program for prevention of deafness and hearing loss has also engaged with ministries of health in different countries to support them in strategy development and implementation for ear and hearing care.

Providing countries with standardized and evidence-based recommendations and guidance documents is a key aspect of WHO's work. These include training resources, planning templates, sharing of good practices, and more. WHO has developed many such resources that are commonly referred to and used by countries while planning and delivering ear and hearing care (Fig. 3).

The WHO program also needs to respond to emerging issues. In 2015, it identified unsafe listening practices among youth as a big threat to hearing health due to its widespread prevalence and the fact that most of those at risk are young individuals with potentially many years of healthy life ahead. In response to this, WHO launched the Make Listening Safe initiative in 2015 with the aim reducing the risk of hearing loss posed by unsafe exposure to sounds in recreational settings.⁷

GLOBAL HEALTH COMMUNITY ADOPTS A RESOLUTION ON HEARING LOSS

An outcome of advocacy efforts was that in May 2015, the World Health Assembly raised the issue of hearing loss and highlighted the need for a new resolution in order to accelerate work in this area. Following this call, a resolution on prevention of deafness and hearing loss was discussed and unanimously adopted by the World Health



Make Listening Safe

Fig. 3. Logo for WHO's initiative to make listening safe. (From WHO Department for Management of NCDs, Disability, Violence and Injury Prevention (NVI). Make listening safe: prevention of blindness and deafness. World Health Organization (WHO). Available at: http://www.who.int/pbd/deafness/activities/MLS_main_infographic_A4_lowres_for_web.pdf?ua=1; with permission.)

Assembly in 2017 (WHA70.13).¹² This newly adopted resolution points to the importance of addressing hearing loss in order to achieve the sustainable development goals 3 and 4, which relate to well-being and education. This resolution urges countries to integrate strategies for ear and hearing care within the framework of their health care systems, as part of universal health coverage. It calls upon governments to

- Collect population-based data on ear diseases and hearing loss
- Establish training programs for human resource development
- Ensure immunization coverage as a preventive measure
- Establish screening programs for early identification and management of ear diseases and hearing loss
- Improve access to cost-effective, high-quality assistive hearing technologies
- Provide access to alternate means of communication for people with hearing loss

In essence, it provides countries with an outline strategy for addressing hearing loss. The resolution also calls upon WHO to undertake several actions that will support its implementation by member states and provide countries with guidance and technical resources required to act upon and implement the ambitious resolution.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Based on the outline provided by the resolution, WHO plans to intensify its work in this field in the coming years. It has identified 4 strategic areas for work.

Evidence-Based Advocacy

In order to undertake effective evidence-based advocacy for prioritization of ear and hearing care, WHO plans to continue and promote observance of March 3 as the World Hearing Day every year.¹¹ WHO also plans to develop and launch a world report on hearing. The report will provide a global perspective regarding hearing loss and make recommendations regarding future actions to address this issue. As part of its advocacy and sensitization efforts, a learning module on ear and hearing care will be developed in collaboration with professional organizations. This module will be developed and implemented through training programs for professional skill development.

Data

In order to drive action for hearing loss, WHO plans to gather and collate data that can provide basis for advocacy and guide evidence-based policy formulation. Currently, it is developing a handbook on survey for prevalence of hearing loss and its causes. Epidemiologic studies will be conducted in identified countries across all regions using this manual. It also plans to undertake a global survey to assess hearing loss prevalence, access to rehabilitation and availability of human resources, and public health action.

EHC Strategy Development and Implementation at National Levels

This is key to the provision of ear and hearing care at the community level. WHO intends to continue providing technical support for the development of evidence-based strategies integrated within the health system framework. A toolkit of comprehensive technical support is under development that will assist countries in planning of EHC strategies, development of screening services, human resource training, awareness creation, and provision of devices and rehabilitation. Regional initiatives will be

promoted and regional consultations organized to sensitize countries and professionals regarding EHC planning and provision.

Make Listening Safe Initiative

WHO will continue to drive forward this initiative in partnership with stakeholders. In the coming years, it plans to continue its collaboration with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) to launch the global standards for safe listening devices, raise awareness through a public health campaign on safe listening, and recommend a regulatory framework for control of recreational sound exposure.

IMPORTANCE OF COORDINATED GLOBAL ACTION

WHO's actions can provide some visibility to the often-ignored subject of ear and hearing problems. However, WHO's efforts can only be a part of a greater plan. The collective responsibility of shaping the future of the hearing care agenda lies with all stakeholders in this field and has to be led by ear and hearing professionals, who need to move forward as a collective entity, sharing a single vision, with each one contributing to the whole.

In practical terms, it means that researchers need to ask themselves about the translation of their research findings to the larger population and its application in different resource settings. Teachers can imbibe and impart the concepts of public health as they apply to ear and hearing care. This will help ensure that future professionals in this field can have a holistic attitude toward service provision. Clinicians and service providers need to think of ways and means to make services accessible to all those who need it.

Most of all, professionals need to question themselves about the needs of and barriers to ear and hearing care and seek solutions to address these, with the ultimate aim that ear and hearing care can be accessible for all those who need it, across the world.

SUMMARY

Given the recent developments at international fora, there is a heightened consciousness about ear and hearing problems within the global health community. Stakeholders in the field of ear and hearing care, especially professionals, must capitalize on this momentum to raise awareness on hearing loss and ensure that it is integrated within health care systems of countries. There is an urgency for action, lest momentum is lost.

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