



## WHO programme for prevention of deafness and hearing loss: an outline

### Hearing loss: the looming epidemic

Currently, an estimated 5.3% of the world's population (360 million) lives with disabling hearing loss including 32 million children. It is likely that the coming years will see a rise in hearing loss prevalence, due to:

- ongoing demographic shift and greater number of older adults, one-third of whom are expected to have hearing loss.
- the increasing practice of listening to loud music over long periods and exposure to damaging levels in noisy entertainment venues. It is estimated that over 1 billion young persons (12-35 years of age) are at risk of hearing loss due to unsafe listening.
- Persistence of other risk factors including ear infections, infectious diseases, birth complications, exposure to occupational noise and ototoxic medicines.

### Need to address hearing loss

Unless hearing loss is addressed suitably, it has a profound impact on the lives of those affected by it, as well as their families and communities. Hearing loss is a barrier to communication and language development, is associated with delayed cognitive development in children and early cognitive decline in older adults. Unaddressed hearing loss restricts educational and employment opportunities, hampers social interaction and emotional well-being and often poses an economic challenge. As a matter of fact, it is one of the leading causes of morbidity, in terms of 'disability adjusted life years (DALYs)' and years lived with disability (YLD), globally. Moreover, it is estimated that globally, unaddressed hearing loss poses an annual cost of \$750billion.

Many of the causes that lead to hearing loss are preventable. In children, 60% of hearing loss can be prevented through public health strategies. Those who have hearing loss can be greatly benefitted by timely and appropriate interventions.

### WHO programme for prevention of deafness and hearing loss (PDH)

The relevance of hearing loss and required actions have been highlighted by the World Health Assembly through its resolutions WHA48.9 of 1995 and

#### WHO's vision

'A world in which no person experiences hearing loss due to preventable causes and those with unavoidable hearing loss can achieve their full potential through rehabilitation, education and empowerment'.

WHA70.13 of 2017. These resolutions have called upon Member States and partners to integrate strategies for ear and hearing care within the framework of their health systems and undertake actions to ascertain that ear and hearing care is accessible to those who need it. In the context of these resolutions, WHO objectives are to:

- Raise awareness for prioritization of ear and hearing care.
- Mitigate preventable causes of hearing loss.
- Ensure that ear and hearing care is accessible for all.

**Main achievements 2012-17:**

- Development and adoption of a World Health Assembly Resolution on prevention of deafness and hearing loss (WHA70.13).
- Organization of the World Hearing day each year from 2012-2017 with an annual theme; evidence-based advocacy messages and information products.
- Release of global data on prevalence of hearing loss in 2012.
- Launch of report on 'Multi-country assessment of national capacity to provide hearing care' in 2014.
- Launch of 'Make Listening Safe' initiative to address the growing risk of hearing loss due to loud music, in 2015 with release of global data.
- Release of data on causes of childhood hearing loss in 2016.
- Launch of report on Global costs of unaddressed hearing loss and cost effectiveness of interventions in 2017.
- Development of a global network of collaborating centres on prevention of deafness and hearing loss with biennial meetings held in 2013 and 2015.
- Regional/sub-regional consultations in Eastern Mediterranean Region, South-East Asia Region, Region of the Americas, African Region and Western Pacific Region.
- Development of national strategies for ear and hearing care in Guinea Conakry, Kenya, Malawi, Morocco, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka, Zambia and Zimbabwe.
- Release of the following technical documents:
  - Promoting ear and hearing care through Community-Based Rehabilitation, as part of WHO CBR Guidelines
  - Strategies for prevention and care of childhood hearing loss
  - Ear and Hearing Care Situation Analysis Tool
  - Manual for planning and monitoring of national strategies
  - Preferred profile for hearing aids in low and middle-income settings

Following the adoption of the WHA 7.13, WHO has identified the following strategic areas of work for 2018-2021:

- Gather and collate data to drive action for hearing loss
- Undertake effective evidence-based advocacy for prioritization of ear and hearing care
- Support strategy development and implementation in WHO Member States
- Develop and promote the 'Make Listening Safe' initiative

## **Gather and collate data to drive action for hearing loss**

**Context:** The Multi-country assessment of national capacity report (WHO, 2013) shows a lack of data on hearing loss prevalence, causes and impact. Accurate, comparable and up-to-date data from across the world is required to:

- Undertake evidence-based advocacy
- Guide policy formulation
- Enable monitoring of global trends
- Provide information for the World Report on Hearing

### **Actions:**

- a. Support conduct of epidemiological studies in selected countries across all regions: a 'handbook on survey for prevalence of hearing loss and its causes' is being developed and will be launched towards the end of 2017. This handbook will provide guidance regarding conduct of population-based prevalence studies. This will be followed by conduct of population-based prevalence studies in identified Member States across all regions with supervision and technical support.
- b. Undertake a global survey on various aspects of hearing loss: with an integrated hearing test with the aim of having an overview of hearing loss prevalence and assessment of access to rehabilitation measures.
- c. Collect data on public health aspects of hearing: data regarding human resource availability, national plans and identified indicators will be sought from countries. This will be reported in the World Report on Hearing and subsequent updates.
- d. Develop a database of contacts within each country: that will include contacts in all WHO Member States (if feasible).

**Expected impact:** Increased availability of global, regional and national data to support advocacy efforts and promotion of evidence-based policy formulation.

## **Undertake effective evidence-based advocacy for prioritization of ear and hearing care**

**Context:** There is an overall lack of awareness regarding the importance of hearing and the impact of hearing loss among policymakers, healthcare providers and communities. Evidence-based advocacy is essential to highlight this issue and drive action for hearing loss at global, national and community levels.

### **Actions:**

- a. Observe World Hearing Day annually: the World Hearing Day has been established as an annual advocacy event supported by WHO. WHO will determine the theme of the day, identify evidence-based key messages, develop relevant communication products and launch a communication campaign.
- b. Launch the World Report on Hearing: following the adoption of the WHA resolution on hearing loss, the World Report on Hearing will be the next step in advocacy based on global data and available evidence. The report will make recommendations regarding future actions to address hearing loss.
- c. Update website and enhance social media outreach: an updated and accessible WHO website is essential for suitable dissemination of information and products. This will be supported with social media tools.
- d. Develop a learning module on ear and hearing care for hearing care professionals: the purpose of such a module would be to sensitize professionals towards public health aspects of ear and hearing care. The module would be developed in consultation with professional bodies and implemented through training programmes.

**Expected impact:** Raised awareness on hearing loss and hearing care will drive policy formulation in countries. Increased awareness within civil society will help ensure greater acceptance of hearing loss and ear and hearing care by communities.

## **Support strategy development and implementation in WHO Member States**

**Context:** WHO works with ministries of health and partners in Member States to drive policy formulation and implementation in the field of hearing loss. Country work is key to the provision of ear and hearing care at community level within countries. WHO provides technical support for the development of evidence-based strategies integrated within the health system framework.

### **Actions:**

- a. Develop a 'toolkit of comprehensive technical support': the toolkit intends to assist countries in planning of EHC strategies; development of screening services; human resource training; awareness creation and provision of devices and rehabilitation. The toolkit will consist of five different toolboxes, each with a set of guidance documents and instruments.
- b. Promote regional collaborations: to support country level action through regular regional consultations and experience sharing.
- c. Support country-level planning: through technical assistance to countries in the development and implementation of EHC strategies through in-depth assistance, where requested.

**Expected impact:** Development and implementation of national strategies, which will promote greater access to ear and hearing care for all.

## **Develop and promote the 'Make Listening Safe' initiative**

**Context:** Unsafe listening is possibly the biggest 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 view of this, WHO launched the Make Listening Safe initiative in 2015 with the aim to reduce the risk of hearing loss posed by unsafe exposure to sounds in recreational settings. In partnership with the International Telecommunication Union, WHO initiated a multi-stakeholder collaboration for setting standards for safe listening devices. WHO has partnered with the University of Luzern and experts in field of health communication, audiology, acoustics and civil society to develop a health communication strategy.

### **Actions:**

- a. Develop and implement global standards for safe listening devices: through a consultative and evidence-based collaborative process with participation of all stakeholders.
- b. Launch a public health campaign for listening behaviour change: through launch of a Safe listening app and other materials. Actions addressing different target groups will be undertaken over the coming years. These aim to change listening behaviour, especially in the 'at-risk' population (12-35 years old).
- c. Recommend a regulatory framework for the control of recreational sound exposure: as a next step WHO aims to advocate for safe listening venues and concerts through proposing a regulatory framework.

**Expected impact:** Raised awareness about risks of loud sounds and lowered risk of hearing loss in the target group.