## Hearing loss: a challenge to public health that must be heard

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*Being unable to hear properly – now known to be linked to the onset of dementia - affects millions of older people in Europe, experts told the European Health Forum Gastein. A study due to be published in 2015 has for the first time shown that wearing a hearing aid slows down cognitive decline.*

**Bad Hofgastein, 1 October 2014**  - Hearing loss, a devastating problem for 10 million older people in France alone, “can be prevented, diagnosed, and compensated,” Dr Pierre Anhoury, CEO of the French organisation Agir Pour l'Audition (Acting for Hearing), told the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG). He argued for a new economic model to ensure older people have hearing aids, and set out a 10-point plan to tackle the problem: “It's time to react at a EU level and follow our call for actions.”

The link between hearing loss and cognitive decline was identified in a 2011 study1. A new French study, due to be published in 2015, not only confirms the correlation between hearing loss and dementia, but for the first time suggests that hearing aids use attenuates cognitive decline. “Taken together these results underline the importance of dealing with the problem of under-diagnosis and under-treatment of hearing loss, in particular in older people,” Dr Anhoury said.

While the science of the link between hearing loss and dementia is not yet clear, it is thought that as deafness gets worse greater cognitive resources are dedicated to auditory processing, leaving fewer resources for other processes, like working memory2.

**Hearing loss increasingly affects younger people**

Dr Anhoury said there was no argument about the social isolation and other severe problems resulting from hearing loss, which increasingly affected younger people too. A 2012 IPSOS survey of young people in France found 52 per cent had experienced induced-noise “troubles”, and 29 per cent tinnitus. Agir Pour l’Audition's own figures showed that 74 per cent of young people listened to music through headphones for more than an hour a day, and 43 per cent fell asleep with the headphones on; 84 per cent needed to turn up the volume when in public transport. “Hearing Loss is not just about ears, but about brains”, said Dr Anhoury.

A plan of action required epidemiological data, with a review of EU figures, early detection at all ages, and identification of problems associated with hearing loss, including the societal impact. And a new economic approach was needed to hearing-rehabilitation technology, he said.

His organisation's 10-point call for EU-wide action also includes a campaign to protect young people from damaging their hearing; early screening of hearing loss, especially among over-60s; promotion of more research and earlier and better rehabilitation; implementation in all EU Member States of EU quality norm EN 15927 for services offered by hearing professionals; the spread of evidence-based guidelines for clinicians, caregivers, schools, and workplaces; industry partnerships for affordable hearing devices; new economic models to make hearing aids accessible, with price control and more appropriate financial support.

An increased awareness of the reality of hearing loss across Europe could and should lead to profound changes in policy, he argued, especially as it affected children and older people: “With increased support from policy makers, scientists, and clinicians, we can improve clinical practices, rehabilitation tools and education systems for hearing-impaired people to be better engaged in society and achieve a higher level of quality of life. Hearing health must be part of global health.”

“Electing Health – The Europe We Want” is the motto for this year’s EHFG. Around 600 participants from more than 50 countries are attending the most important health policy conference in the EU to exchange view on key issues affecting European health systems. The future direction of European health policy is the key topic on the conference agenda.

*1Lin et al, 2011
2Peelle, Troiani, Grossman, and Wingfield, 2011*

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