

Hearing Impairment: Prevalence and its Challenges

Sir,

Hearing loss is an invisible disability present in every region of the world. Approximately 10% of the world population is affected by hearing loss of variable degree. In the developed countries, 3 per 1,000 children, and in developing countries, >6 per 1,000 children are affected at birth. The prevalence of hearing impairment is higher in low-middle-income countries (LMICs), while in high-income countries, the prevalence is lower due to better access to healthcare services, increased awareness, and early interventions. It is estimated that over 700 million people may have disabling hearing loss by 2050.¹

Generally, hearing loss increases with an increase in age. In adults, extended exposure to loud noise is the major cause of hearing loss. Other causes include wax and ear infections that block the ear passage, which cause temporary hearing loss which can be corrected by appropriate treatment. In most cases, hearing loss may be permanent due to damage to the inner ear or the auditory nerve.²

Approximately 50% of hearing loss cases are preventable. In children below 15 years of age, 60% of cases can be avoided. Numerous preventive strategies are effective in preventing hearing loss including vaccination against rubella to avoid congenital rubella syndrome, vaccination against H. influenza and S. pneumoniae to decrease the cases of meningitis, and to avoid exposure to loud noise.³

Hearing loss has negative impact on interpersonal communications, mental health, quality of life, and economics. In children, unaddressed hearing loss mainly damages the development of language, lack of schooling, and social and mental problems. Continuing these problems in adulthood may cause a decreased connection with society that leads to isolation, anxiety, depression, disgrace, and mental and physical health problems. These individuals find it very hard to develop relationships with partners, and children. They also have limited job opportunities and comparatively low income.⁴

Individuals with extreme degrees of hearing loss mainly communicate through sign language. This language conveys their thoughts through manual communication and body language. This type of communication involves the involvement of hand shapes, movements of hands, arms, body, and facial expressions to share thoughts.⁵

Since 2007, the World Health Organization has promoted increased public awareness of hearing loss by World Hearing Day on 3rd March each year. The implications of unaddressed hearing loss are extremely high in developing countries including Pakistan. Public awareness programmes must be encouraged, and various public and private stakeholders must be involved to coordinate

seminars, programmes, and walks every 3rd March as a World Hearing Day to engage common people. Vaccinations, family education on hearing problems, early diagnosis, and treatment of infections must be arranged and encouraged.

COMPETING INTEREST:

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Shakil Ahmed Shaikh¹, Salma Farukh Memon² and Muhammad Ali Bhatti³

¹Department of Physiology, Suleman Roshan Medical College, Tando Adam, Karachi, Pakistan

²Department of Physiology, Liaquat University of Medical and Health Sciences, Jamshoro, Pakistan

³Department of Otorhinolaryngology, PAF Hospital, Sargodha, Pakistan

Correspondence to: Dr. Shakil Ahmed Shaikh, Department of Physiology, Suleman Roshan Medical College, Tando Adam, Karachi, Pakistan
E-mail: sshakilonly@hotmail.com

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