

A Lancet Commission to address the global burden of hearing loss



To mark World Hearing Day for 2019, we are pleased to announce a *Lancet* Commission to identify ways to reduce the global burden of hearing loss. The Commission follows a recent *Lancet* Review of the state of global hearing health care and possibilities for improving it.¹

As noted in the Review, hearing loss was the fourth leading cause of years lived with disability (YLDs) worldwide in 2015, representing 5·8% of YLDs due to all causes. Additionally, in 2015, half a billion people worldwide had a disabling hearing loss and 1·34 billion had a mild-to-complete hearing loss in the better-hearing ear—6·8% and 18·1% of the world's population, respectively.

Perhaps even more disturbing is the fact that hearing loss reaches far beyond the sensory impairment. Hearing loss is especially damaging to childhood development,² and is strongly associated with dementia and other health conditions among people in the sixth decade of life and older. Indeed, prevention or treatment of hearing loss in midlife (45–65 years) or later could reduce the incidence of dementia by as much as 9·1%.³ Thus, prevention and treatment of hearing loss are particularly important at the two ends of the age spectrum. Moreover, the world's population is increasing and ageing, which underscores the need for prevention and treatment in the later years.

Recently, hearing loss has received unprecedented attention. The attention includes the Review and Editorials in *The Lancet*;^{2,4,5} a 2015 letter report from the US President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology on "aging America and hearing loss: imperative of improved hearing technology";⁶ a comprehensive report in 2016 by the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine on *Hearing health care for adults: priorities for improved access and affordability*;⁷ a detailed report by WHO in 2017 on the global costs of unaddressed hearing loss (estimated to be US\$750–790 billion annually);⁸ ratification in 2017 by the World Health Assembly (WHA) of a "Resolution and action plan for prevention of deafness and hearing loss";⁹ signing into law of the "Over-the-counter hearing aid act" by the US President in 2017; calls to action we have made

with colleagues,^{10,11} and in 2019 development by WHO and the International Telecommunication Union of an international standard for permissible sound exposures to protect an estimated 1·1 billion people aged 12–35 years against damagingly loud exposures from personal audio devices.¹²

The purposes of this *Lancet* Commission are to accelerate the present momentum and to examine how to reduce the global burden of hearing loss. We seek innovative solutions to this immense global problem. The work will be done alongside ongoing efforts by WHO and other organisations and will be designed to complement and extend these efforts. The Commissioners include world experts in otology, audiology, neuroscience, engineering, public health (particularly economic analyses), and public policy. Additionally, half of the Commissioners are from low-income and middle-income countries, where more than 80% of the people with hearing loss reside, and two Commissioners have personal experience of hearing loss and thus can offer personal perspectives. Blake S Wilson will Chair the Commission and Shelly Chadha, Bolajoko O Olusanya, and Debara L Tucci will be the Co-Chairs for the Commission.

Themes of the Commission are prevention, policy, technology, and protection, and their interactions. Working groups will explore each of the themes in

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detail, and the Commissioners in the groups will be assisted by advisers who also are internationally acclaimed in their fields. We expect to release the Commission’s report in conjunction with World Hearing Day in 2021.

The Commission follows a recommendation presented in the Editorial that accompanied the *Lancet* Review, “Hearing loss: time for sound action”.⁵ The Editorial states that “The WHO [WHA] resolution should serve as a catalyst for a coordinated global movement, encouraged at the country level, with the involvement of health-care professionals, researchers, and advocates to help reduce the global hearing loss burden.” We believe the Commission will help guide and jump start those further necessary efforts. The time has come to give hearing loss the priority it deserves.

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