



AGEING AND HEARING

SOEREN HOUGAARD
SECRETARY GENERAL. EHIMA

When people in general talk about “healthy ageing”, they usually think about physical health: cardio-vascular diseases, cancer, diabetes – you name it. Once in a while, mental ailments are also touched upon: depression, dementia – or simply: general self-reported health. Despite the fact that it affects an estimated 80 million Europeans (1), hearing loss and its many consequences are rarely discussed. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that hearing loss is invisible; it typically emerges gradually over several years and not in a sudden, dramatic way and it is not considered a life-threatening handicap.

And yet the sad fact remains that hearing loss does indeed have a host of sometimes severe psycho-social consequences. In a large, pan-European health survey ca-

ried out in 2006 and again in 2010 (2), it was shown that the group having hearing loss in 2006 surveyed 4 years later showed:

- 22 % Increased risk of having developed depressive symptoms.
- 24 % Increased risk of having developed lower self-reported general health.
- 19% increased risk of cognitive impairment.

These trends were confirmed by recent surveys in Germany, France, United Kingdom, Italy, and Norway (3) where it was also shown that the use of hearing aids had a positive influence on both depressive symptoms and the risk of developing cognitive impairment or mild dementia.

Table 1: Depression symptoms. Hearing aid owners have lower risk of being depressed

Depression %	U.K.	Germany	France	Italy	Norway
With H. aid	16	19	17	32	9
No H. aid	41	29	21	37	21

Note: the group without hearing aids had similar hearing losses to the group using hearing aids.

The same pattern applies to the group with cognitive impairment.

Table 2: Dementia. Hearing aid users have lower risk of being forgetful compared to hearing impaired non-users

Dementia %	U.K.	Germany	France	Italy	Norway
With H. aid	60	61	57	72	45
No H. aid	73	74	68	79	57

The numbers vary from country, but the trend is clear.

Already back in 2005, the WHO found that hearing loss reduces the number of healthy life years. (4) This is doubly sad, first of all for all those affected, but also for national and EU finances. A European Commission standard sets a statistical value for ‘one quality year’ of life at €44,000 (5). This “social cost issue” was further highlighted by a recent report from the Netherlands (6) where it was found that hearing loss is the 6th most expensive health condition in that country: Hearing loss costs Dutch society 950 million € per year and the situation gets worse with the ageing of society.

The prevalence of hearing loss increases with age. The demographic development in Europe is well-known: from 2010 to 2050, the proportion of people over 65 with disabilities will increase by 77% (7). An ageing society, in consequence, is one where the number of hearing impaired people will rise exponentially. A society focusing on “healthy ageing” is therefore one which keeps its citizens well-informed about the risks of hearing loss, the effects – and the possible remedies. And one which makes hearing rehabilitation accessible to all its citizens without any kind of discrimination – as outlined in the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (8)

From a personal health point of view, as well as from a national finances point of view, it is clear that early detection of hearing loss and professional hearing rehabilitation are vital and fundamental for healthy ageing. In this light, EU member states should avoid unjustified cuts in social protection for people with hearing loss under the austerity policies introduced in many countries in response to the economic crisis. In a sustainable, competitive and innovative society, the focus must be on long-term investment for people with hearing loss rather than short-term cost-cutting.

- Report on mobility and inclusion of people with disabilities and the European Disability Strategy 2010 – 2020. July 7, 2011. Rapporteur: *Ádám Kósa*, Member of the European Parliament.
- SHARE: Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe. Article on ageing and hearing by Dr Karen Andersen-Ranberg in preparation.
- EuroTrak 2012, Anovum/EHIMA
- WHO, Global Health Report, 2005
- “Evaluation of the Social and Economic Costs of Hearing Impairment”, October 2006, Hear-it AISBL

- Healthy Ageing, University Medical Center, Groningen, 2011
- Report on mobility and inclusion of people with disabilities and the European Disability Strategy 2010 – 2020. July 7, 2011. Rapporteur: Ádám Kósa, Member of the European Parliament.
- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), 2011

