

POSITION STATEMENT

TITLE: NOISE INJURY

ISSUE:

There is an urgent need to address the injury risks and consequences associated with exposure to excessive noise, targeting all Australians, warning them of the permanent injury associated with noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL) and noise-induced Tinnitus (NIT). Predictions made in the mid-1990s of a large proportion of the Australian male population having a noticeable hearing impairment by 2014 appear to be coming to fruition.

There is widespread acknowledgement of the impending problem, but no government in Australia has demonstrated a willingness to take up the issue and actually do something about it. Likewise, hearing-related organisations have generally appeared unwilling to lobby governments to tackle the situation. The Hon. Julie Bishop, MP, when Commonwealth Minister for Ageing, recognised the problem, even quoting past predictions at the 3rd National Deafness Sector Summit in Brisbane in 2004.

There are two main issues involved in the behaviour patterns of people who expose themselves to high levels of noise, despite the hearing health issues involved in doing so. The first is ignorance. Ignorance of the fact that their hearing has been irreparably damaged with each exposure to loud noise. Ignorance of the disruption that will occur to their lives when the consequences of their behaviour become apparent. Ignorance of the possibility that the ringing sound (Tinnitus) they hear could both increase in volume and become permanent.

For some people, the second issue is a belief in their invincibility. A belief in their own superiority. A belief that hearing problems will happen to others and not to them. A belief that you are weak if you wear ear protection. Some people from particular backgrounds even have a belief that men from those backgrounds can listen to loud music without suffering any harmful effects.

The damage being caused to Australia's youth is not hidden: it is in your face every time a "doof-doof" car drives past. People look, shake their heads, and then go on their way. Young people talk and joke about how their ears ring every time they attend a concert or nightclub. Generally through ignorance, they keep repeating the behaviour because there is no real and immediate negative aspect to what they are doing, such as pain.

It is not only young people, however, who expose themselves to noise injury. Older Australians need just as much education about the risks. Sources of dangerous noise are many and varied. They include farm machinery, guns, industrial equipment and workplaces, power lawnmowers and leaf blowers, power hand tools, backpack vacuum cleaners, aircraft noise on tarmacs, loud music from any source (e.g.

personal and car stereos, nightclubs, gym and dance classes, orchestra pits), and much more - even squealing pigs in a piggery. It is astonishing that people so interested in physical fitness expose participants to noise injury at gym and dance classes. Just one analysis of the hearing test results of 85,000 noise-exposed Western Australian workers showed that almost 60% of them had noise-induced hearing loss.

In workplaces, noise is an occupational health and safety issue. The South Australian Farm Noise & Hearing Network has successfully implemented a project designed to ensure a healthy hearing farming community, using the collaborative efforts of health and industry workers. Farmsafe Australia has developed a Noise Injury Prevention Strategy for the Australian Farming Community, not just for farm workers but also for their families. These farm projects/strategies may provide useful models that could be adapted in other noise areas.

The eleventh annual International Noise Awareness Day is scheduled for 26 April 2006. This annual event has been almost ignored in Australia to date. It may be a vehicle that could be used to generate awareness.

The word "epidemic" invokes powerful visions of mass infection, panic, and even social disruption. For instance, flu epidemics affect thousands of Australians every year, forcing governments to intervene with national health and education campaigns. On the other hand, many thousands of Australians (not just a few thousand) are needlessly inflicting permanent injury to their hearing, and no one will stand up to be counted. To refer to the ever-increasing incidence of hearing impairment and ear disorders (particularly amongst Australia's youth) as a "silent epidemic", would be to understate the problem.

Something must be done. Governments have procrastinated for too long. The time has come for action. What is required is for someone to start the ball rolling. Someone to stand up and say: "Hey! Australia has a problem here, and if we don't do something about it soon, it is going to get a whole lot worse."

To quote an adage that is as true today as it was generations ago: "An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure". To add to that adage and deliberately misquote Edmund Burke: "The only thing necessary for noise injury to flourish, is for good people to do nothing".

During 2005, Deafness Forum commissioned Hearworks Pty Ltd to undertake some relevant research. The final report of the study is scheduled to be completed by April 2006 and the findings will be presented at the 4th National Deafness sector Summit in May 2006, immediately prior to the launch of a first Deafness Forum campaign aimed at raising public awareness of the potential for noise-induced hearing loss and injury. Additionally, in 2006, International Noise Awareness Day and Hearing Awareness week will be used to focus on noise-induced hearing loss and injury. Four slogans have been adopted for this initial campaign:

- Noise Destroys **YOUR** Hearing
- Don't Expose Yourself - to excessive **NOISE**



- **BOOM** Cars - Acoustic Terrorism
- Baby Boomers - From Earrings to Ears **RINGING**

POSITION:

That Deafness Forum and its members be proactive in the prevention of noise injury caused hearing impairment and hearing disorders, and actively advocate for ongoing national education campaigns designed to protect particular groups of Australians from such noise injury. Targeting should recognise that only a limited amount of money and human energy is available. Target groups might be based on age, ethnicity, gender, occupation, etc., according to evidence of the likelihood of exposure to injury. The entire campaign must be highly focussed, not have a broad shotgun approach. Campaigning should also be ongoing, with Deafness Forum and its members proactively involved wherever the opportunity existed. The aims should be to ensure that:

- all relevant governments provide adequate regulation to control noise (perhaps based on existing and (proven) successful overseas regulatory systems (e.g. UK)
- all manufacturers of noisy items and operators of noisy venues recognise and accept their duty of care to purchasers and patrons
- public, private and community sectors work together towards the common goal of eliminating all noise injury
- every Australian, today and in the future:
 - is aware of the permanent nature of noise injury
 - is aware of the resulting work, social and family consequences of noise injury
 - has enough information to make a fully informed choice about self-exposure to loud noise

COSTS OF POSITION:

The actual costs have not been estimated and would depend on the nature of the campaigns. Any national education campaign should be conducted and funded by the Commonwealth Government with the support of Deafness Forum and its member organisations. The public health benefits and savings arising from preventing noise injury would, in themselves, justify that. The Commonwealth funding could be supplemented by other governments and by private sponsors (probably from the hearing protection/safety industries, and/or State and Territory Occupational Safety and Health bodies).

RESEARCH BASIS:

During 2005, Deafness Forum commissioned Hearworks Pty Ltd to undertake some research. The study is addressing the following questions:

- (i) Relationship between noise exposure from various sources and hearing loss/hearing disorders, in particular including clear assessment of the risks associated with leisure-time noise exposure, and



- (ii) Current and predicted incidence of noise-induced hearing loss/hearing disorders (by age groups), given current noise exposure from various sources.

The final report of the study is scheduled to be completed by April 2006 and the findings will be presented at the 4th National Deafness sector Summit in May 2006.

APPROVED: Board - 4 April 2005.

REVIEWED: CEO – 30 January 2006.

DATE OF NEXT SCHEDULED REVIEW: No further review yet scheduled.