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Silence is golden but not when it's permanent



Rates of hearing loss increase with age from birth to teenagerhood.

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 - COMMENTS

Everyone likes their quiet time. As the saying goes, silence is golden. But you want silence only on your terms, a temporary reprieve, not to be denied the ability to hear the world in all its chaotic glory.

Despite all the advances in science and technology, hearing loss and deafness is still a prominent disability.

In Australia, about 10 in every 10,000 births involves a child who will be diagnosed with a moderate or greater hearing loss in both ears. By the age of 17, another 23 children in 10,000 will acquire a hearing

impairment. The indigenous are most at risk. Rates of hearing loss also increase with age.

There are different causes of hearing loss and the level of severity varies but, as with any medical condition, early diagnosis and intervention are crucial. It also may pay to get a second opinion and shop around.

Allegedly false and misleading claims about hearing aids have caught the attention of the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission. The consumer watchdog has taken Federal Court action against retailers Oticon Australia and Sonic Innovations over newspaper ads published last year under the AudioClinic and Hearing Life brands.

According to the ACCC, the companies misled pensioners about the availability of free hearing tests under the Australian Government Hearing Services Program, the inclusions with free hearing aids and that, as depicted in the ad, the user of their products would no longer miss any conversations.

Says ACCC commissioner Sarah Court: "We encourage consumers to shop around for the best deal, compare offers and choose a hearing aid that is right for their needs."

The companies face possible penalties totalling \$2.5 million. The ACCC also is seeking enforcement action against other companies.

Hearing loss specifically will be mentioned in aged-care quality standards for the first time after lobbying from advocacy groups.

"There's been a scarcity of hearing assistance training for aged-care staff, from registered nurses to direct carers and the teams of auditors employed by the Australian Aged Care Quality Agency to monitor aged-care facilities," Deafness Forum of Australia chairman David Brady says.

Brady says the changes to the standards, due next year, will result in greater scrutiny of the management of hearing loss in aged care.

A year ago, a report by the Hearing Care Industry Association estimated more than 1.3 million Australians were living with hearing conditions that could have been prevented.

The report says one in seven Australians suffer from hearing loss, more than 90 per cent of whom are aged over 50. With the ageing population, the number of people affected by hearing loss was forecast to rise to one in four by 2050.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are far likelier than other Australian kids to suffer ear infections and hearing loss.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the rate of long-term ear or hearing problem among indigenous children is almost three times that of non-indigenous children (8.4 per cent compared with 2.9 per cent).

“Poor ear and hearing health can profoundly affect a child’s life, impeding cognitive development, auditory processing skills and speech and language development,” the AIHW says.

“Hearing loss can lead to social isolation and problems with school attendance, which can have lifelong negative social consequences. For many indigenous children, hearing loss and the associated aftermaths further compound many of the disadvantages already facing indigenous Australians.”

The need to improve indigenous hearing outcomes was one of the few areas of reform the federal government and a parliamentary committee could agree on last month.

The government told the committee it was re-examining its existing health initiatives and would also use the Medical Research Future Fund to help end avoidable indigenous blindness and deafness.

Meanwhile, in the Northern Territory, dozens of project officers in 20 communities will complement the work of visiting ear specialists under a \$7.9m partnership between the commonwealth, the Northern

Territory government and the Balnaves Foundation, supported by the Menzies School of Health Research.

“This is an exciting new opportunity to remove the preventable blight of hearing loss from current and future generations,” federal Indigenous Health Minister Ken Wyatt says.

“These local ear health warriors will integrate with existing primary care services to help protect the hearing of up to 5000 children from birth to 16 years old.”

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