

Improving Equitable Access to Hearing Care

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Hearing loss is an often underestimated global health care concern. The most recent World Health Organization (WHO) estimates however emphasize the growing global prevalence of disabling hearing loss. The 2018 estimates indicate 466 million people across the globe living with disabling hearing loss (Figure 1). This figure is estimated to increase to 630 million by 2030 and 900 million by 2050 (WHO, 2018). When considering all severities and etiologies of hearing loss, 1.3 billion people had hearing loss in 2016 (Lancet. 2017:390:1211). The impact of disabling hearing loss on the individual is not only sensory, but extends to socio-emotional, socio-economic and vocational spheres (Lancet, 2017; WHO, 2017). Childhood hearing loss may have an especially devastating effect on their academic and socio-emotional development as they grow older.

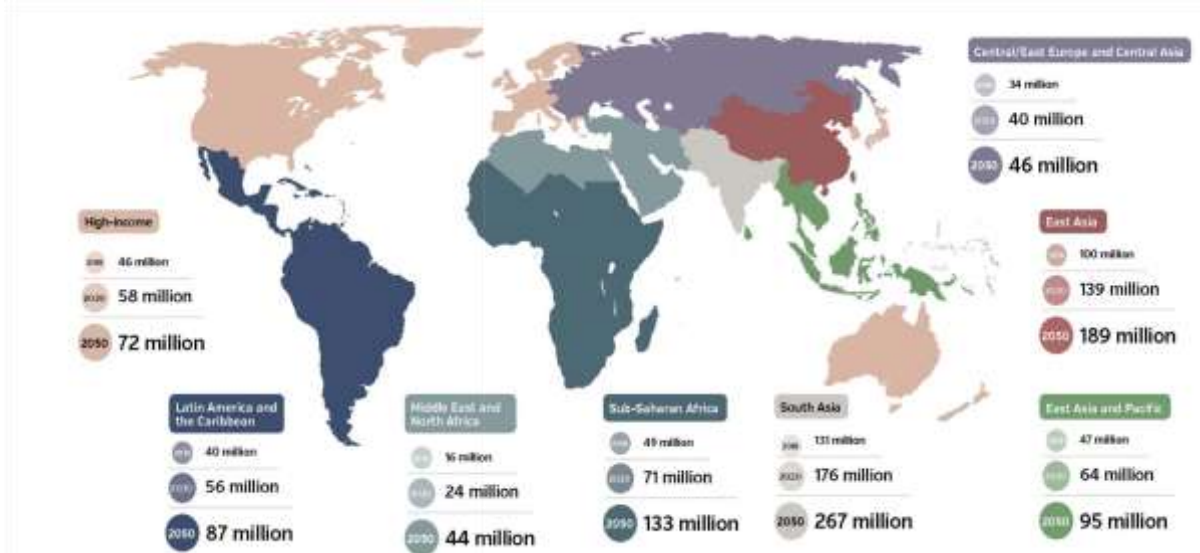


Figure 1. WHO estimates across world regions for prevalence of permanent disabling hearing loss (<http://www.who.int/deafness/world-hearing-day/whd-2018/en>)

Disabling hearing loss impacts the individual and their families primarily; but has a secondary impact on a country's societal and economic infrastructures. The WHO estimated that disabling hearing loss had an annual cost of over 750 billion international dollars globally in 2017 (WHO, 2017). Awareness of the burden of disabling hearing loss is increasing,

however, the lack of prevention and treatment programs for hearing loss globally is becoming a growing concern.

BARRIERS TO ACCESS

A primary factor in the lack of prevention and treatment programs for hearing loss is inaccessibility of hearing healthcare services across the globe. In particular, access to hearing healthcare services in low- to middle-income countries is very limited. For example, in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, it is not uncommon to find more than a million people per hearing healthcare provider (WHO, 2013). The lack of hearing healthcare services in these low- to middle-income countries is alarming, as almost 80% of the world's population with disabling hearing loss resides in these countries (Glob Health Action. 2017:10[1]:1289736). The lack of hearing healthcare services globally includes limited availability of assistive devices for the hearing impaired, such as hearing aids and cochlear implants. Global hearing aid production cannot meet the global demand for hearing aids, especially in developing countries, where less than 3% of people requiring hearing aids are able to receive them (WHO, 2017).

BRIDGING THE GAP

Alternative service delivery models have been investigated for increasing access to hearing healthcare using new technologies and decentralized approaches (Am J Audiol. 2017:26:426). New methods, initiatives and service delivery models that employ new technology, connectivity and decentralized approaches are promising ways to improve accessibility and affordability of hearing healthcare (Clark & Swanepoel, 2014).

Increasing access to these services and resources should be prioritised globally, in order to reduce the global prevalence and burden of disabling hearing loss. Developing equitable access to these resources requires engagement and advocacy from patients, caregivers and stakeholders. For example, the issue of global access to hearing health care will be highlighted in a special roundtable session at the 2018 World Congress of Audiology with WHO's Shelly Chadha, PhD, pioneering hearing care researcher Bolajoko Olusanya from Nigeria, and Jackie Oduor of Kenya, who will share valuable insights into her life as a parent supporting three children with hearing loss. Promoting similar collaborations is a critical step toward identifying issues and solutions to pressing needs issues in global hearing health care.