

World Health Organization and Its Initiative for Ear and Hearing Care

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KEYWORDS

- Global hearing • Hearing loss • Ear and hearing care • Prevention of deafness
- Hearing loss prevention • World hearing day • World Health Association resolution

KEY POINTS

- The World Health Organization (WHO) is the United Nations' specialized agency in the field of health.
- WHO addresses ear and hearing problems through its program for prevention of deafness and hearing loss.
- The World Health Assembly recently adopted a resolution highlighting the need for global and national action to deal with hearing loss.
- Based on this resolution, WHO has identified 4 key strategic work areas for the coming 5 years.
- WHO calls upon all stakeholders, including ear and hearing care professionals, to come together in order to drive global action for hearing loss.

INTRODUCTION

As the global leader in the field of public health, the World Health Organization (WHO) addresses health issues that are prioritized by its Member States^a. These include a diverse variety of areas addressing infections such as malaria, tuberculosis, polio, and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS); reducing mortality and morbidity due to conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer; promoting road safety, violence prevention; and many more areas.¹ The issues that are included in WHO's program of work are typically those that have been highlighted as public health issues

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^a Member State refers to the 194 countries that are members of the United Nations system.

of global importance based on their prevalence, impact, and prioritization by governments and civil society groups.

Relevant to the field of otolaryngology, hearing loss has been prioritized in consequence of its rising prevalence and the importance of hearing as a contributor toward optimal health in all ages. WHO initiated a program for prevention of deafness and hearing loss in the late 1990s to address hearing loss and ear diseases that lead to it. This program has gradually evolved over the last 20 years and recently been strengthened by a newly adopted World Health Assembly resolution. The program is driving a multistakeholder global effort to make ear and hearing care accessible for all people across different regions and income settings. This article summarizes the role that WHO plays in global health, while outlining specifically its strategies for addressing ear problems and hearing loss. It also looks at the importance of coordinated multi-stakeholder global action and makes suggestions about how all professionals can contribute toward this effort.

THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

WHO was established in the aftermath of World War II as the United Nations' specialized agency in the field of health.¹ As the world's directing and coordinating authority on international health, WHO aims to build a better, healthier future for people all over the world. To achieve the sustainable development goal for health: *Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being*, WHO has identified 6 priority areas for action. These are

- Advancing universal health coverage: enabling countries to sustain or expand access to all needed health services and financial protection, and promoting universal health coverage
- Achieving health-related development goals: addressing unfinished and future challenges relating to maternal and child health; combating HIV, malaria, tuberculosis; and completing the eradication of polio and several neglected tropical diseases
- Addressing the challenge of noncommunicable diseases and mental health, violence, and injuries and disabilities
- Ensuring that all countries can detect and respond to acute public health threats under the international health regulations
- Increasing access to quality, safe, efficacious, and affordable medical products (medicines, vaccines, diagnostics, and other health technologies)
- Addressing the social, economic, and environmental determinants of health as a means to promote health outcomes and reduce health inequalities within and between countries

WHO works in close collaboration with the ministries of health of its 194 member states, that is, countries that are part of the United Nations. The headquarters of WHO works closely with its 6 regional offices and over 150 country offices alongside the national governments to ensure the implementation of its ambitious agenda.

The ministries of health of national governments are a key part of the World Health Assembly, which is the supreme decision-making body in global health and guides WHO's agenda and work. Besides governments, WHO partners with many professional, nongovernmental, and civil society organizations and draws upon the knowledge and resources of a large body of experts to guide it in the development of evidence-based policies and recommendations.

HEARING LOSS: CAUSE FOR CONCERN

In 1995, the World Health Assembly discussed the issue of the rising prevalence of hearing loss across the world and highlighted the need to address this as a public

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