

World Health Assembly adopts a resolution on hearing loss: a defining moment for the global hearing health community

BY SHELLY CHADHA AND ALARCOS CIEZA

The World Health Assembly recently adopted a resolution on hearing loss. In this article **Shelly Chadha** and **Alarcos Cieza** outline how the resolution came to be and how the World Health Organization and its partners plan to implement it.

The World Health Assembly adopts a resolution on hearing loss

On 30 May 2017, global leaders and national policymakers in the field of healthcare discussed and unanimously adopted a resolution on prevention of deafness and hearing loss. The discussion was part of the World Health Assembly (WHA) which takes place in Geneva each year [1]. This meeting is hosted by the World Health Organization and representatives of its 194 member states and partner organisations participate in the event. Over 10 days, they raise important health issues facing the world and propose steps to address these.

After a gap of 22 years (the previous WHA resolution on hearing loss was adopted in 1995 [2]), the Assembly highlighted the importance of hearing and acknowledged the need to address hearing loss as well as ear diseases that may lead to it. This issue was brought to the forum by the Russian Federation and was first raised with WHO's Executive Board in 2016, where a draft of the proposed resolution on prevention of deafness and hearing loss was tabled.

Having received widespread support from all of its members, the draft resolution was then presented to the delegates of the World Health Assembly this May. A large number of countries, many speaking on behalf of multiple Member States presented their arguments in support of the resolution, leading to its adoption [3].

What does the resolution say?

The resolution is a call for action. It urges countries to integrate strategies for ear and hearing care within the framework of their health systems. It draws attention to the need for collection of high quality population-based data, human resource development, early identification and management services, noise control and improving access to hearing technologies and communication.

The resolution also lays out clearly the path WHO must follow in order to support countries in the actions mentioned above. It focusses on advocacy efforts through the World Hearing Day that is observed on 3 March each year [4]. It calls for preparation of a World Report on Hearing which summarises current available evidence and makes recommendations for future global actions. As per the resolution, WHO is asked to provide technical support to countries in all their efforts including the development of a comprehensive toolkit. The growing issue of noise induced hearing loss due to recreational exposure is highlighted and WHO asked to address this issue through a collaborative approach.

The resolution cites the sustainable development goals and WHO's aspiration for universal health coverage, neither of

which can be achieved unless people with ear diseases or hearing loss have access to the services they require.

What comes next?

This resolution is an important milestone on the road to global hearing health and strengthens our belief that we are on the right path. It is an advocacy tool that we, the global hearing health community, have received. We must use this tool effectively and relentlessly to shape the future of this domain.

In the coming years WHO plans to build upon the existing programme [5] and activities in this field, in order to ensure that the aspirations of the WHA resolution can be realised.

Member states also face the task of working on the agenda which has been set forth including the development and implementation of national strategies that ensure that people with ear diseases and hearing loss have access to services at grass-root and primary levels. Appropriate actions for effective ear and hearing care provision such as screening programmes, medical and surgical care, human resource development and provision of assistive technologies, have to be integrated within the healthcare systems of countries.

Role of stakeholders

The implementation of this resolution requires a multifocal approach with commitment from all stakeholders. While action points have been set forth for WHO and member states in the WHA resolution, none of them can be undertaken without strong global collaboration that

“The resolution is a call for action and provides a unique opportunity to shape the future of the hearing health domain.”

engages all members of the hearing health community. Ear and hearing care professionals, nongovernmental organisations, foundations and associations, researchers and academia, civil society groups, private sector, UN agencies and governments have to work together in order to implement the resolution. Advocacy, research, epidemiology, service provision, training, access to assistive technologies, policy development and rights' approach are all integral elements of the global action and need to be carried out with a common vision and goal in mind.

In order to discuss this issue and to strengthen global cooperation, WHO called for a stakeholders' consultation at its headquarters in Geneva in July this year [6]. Nearly a hundred participants belonging to many sectors met and discussed actions to promote ear and hearing care. Among other things, the participants discussed the possibility of setting up a global alliance that provides a platform for all stakeholders to engage in this effort.

In the coming years, we hope that all stakeholders including WHO can develop a strong collaborative public health action that will raise greater awareness on this issue and ensure that services for ear and hearing care become accessible to every person across the world.

References

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“WHO calls upon all stakeholders in the global hearing health community to join forces.”

TAKE HOME MESSAGES

- In May 2017, the WHA adopted a resolution on prevention of deafness and hearing loss.
- The resolution is a call for action and outlines activities to be undertaken by WHO and its member states in the coming years.
- The implementation of this resolution and its listed activities requires a coordinated multi-stakeholder effort.
- This is an opportunity for the global hearing health community to work together and shape the future of this domain, with the ultimate aim of making ear and hearing care accessible to all people across the world.

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