



NICE Consultation: Workplace Health – Older Employees

The National Community Hearing Association (NCHA) represents community hearing providers in the UK. NCHA members are committed to good hearing for all and are responsible for the majority of adult community hearing care services in the UK with an excellent record of outcome, safety, and patient satisfaction.

BSHAA is the professional body for hearing aid audiologists providing hearing care to NHS and self-funding clients. They practise in large, medium and small companies and as sole practitioners; and they provide a professional, convenient and local service to people with hearing concerns in every community in the UK.

Q1: What are the most effective and cost-effective methods of protecting and promoting the health and wellbeing of older workers?

More than 10 million people in UK have hearing loss¹. It is estimated England will have 5.3million people over the age of 44 living with moderate or severe hearing loss by 2016². A very recent study has found that around 1 in 10 adults (10.7%) aged 40 to 69 years have substantial hearing impairment but prevalence of hearing aid use was only 2%¹². Most of these people will have moderate hearing loss which means they may find it difficult to follow speech without hearing aids¹.

People with hearing loss are shown to be at risk of loneliness and reduced mental and physical wellbeing^{3,4,13}. People with hearing loss are also likely have a lower employment rate^{1,5}. In the UK the economic cost of unaided hearing loss is estimated to be £13.5bn per year⁶.

Given the prevalence and impact of hearing loss in older people more needs to be done to detect and support older workers with hearing impairment. Currently, many older workers

¹ Action on Hearing Loss – Hearing Matters

² www.poppi.org.uk accessed 15 April 2014

^{3 3} Saito et al (2010) 'Hearing handicap predicts the development of depressive symptoms after three years in older community-dwelling Japanese' p.93-95

^{4 4} Chapter 5 in [Shield \(2006\) "Evaluation of the Social and Economic Cost of Hearing Impairment - a report for hear-it"](#)

^{5 5} Chapter 11 in [Shield \(2006\) "Evaluation of the Social and Economic Cost of Hearing Impairment - a report for hear-it"](#)

^{6 6} Page 167 in [Shield \(2006\) "Evaluation of the Social and Economic Cost of Hearing Impairment - a report for hear-it"](#)

and their employers are unaware of the impact hearing loss can have on health and wellbeing and this results in people delaying seeking help for up to 10 years after the onset of symptoms⁷. Given that hearing correction and adaptation is easier the earlier it starts, such delays add significantly to adverse public health outcomes.

A cost benefit analysis (CBA) has shown hearing screening is cost-effective in older people. The analysis by London Economics in 2010 was conducted using HM Government's guidance on CBA. The CBA showed net present value of hearing screening and intervention to have a cost benefit ratio of 8.1⁸. Adult hearing screening would provide a cost-effective way to improve quality of life for older adults¹⁴.

Therefore, it is vital to ensure that

- older workers are encouraged to look after their hearing and have regular hearing checks - hearing professionals will advise how frequently in each individual case
- employers encourage a positive approach to hearing loss and make accommodations to enable older people with hearing loss to remain in work.

In summary, unaided hearing loss can lead to reduced mental wellbeing. Hearing screening is cost-effective and early intervention (for example with hearing aids) can help improve the health and wellbeing of older workers. We would therefore recommend employers encourage older workers to have their hearing checked in much the same way they have their eyes checked. Hearing services can be accessed in the community and out of hospital across the UK. SMEs and larger employers should also be encouraged to provide hearing screening at work and support individuals maintain active and independent lives.

Q2: What are the most effective and cost-effective methods of supporting workers who wish to continue in employment up to and beyond the state pension age?

Hearing loss is more prevalent in those beyond the state pension age. For example 5.3 million people in England with hearing loss (including mild loss) are of retirement age. However, research has shown that women and men with hearing loss are more likely to seek early retirement⁹.

Older people that wish to stay in work should be supported to do so and hearing loss should not mean they have to stop working. For example, it is estimated 3.8 of the 5.3 million people of retirement age with hearing loss might benefit from hearing aids¹⁰. There is also evidence to show hearing aids can reduce social isolation and that those that wear hearing aids are more likely to participate in social activities¹⁰. Therefore there is sufficient evidence

⁷Davies, Smith, Ferguson Stephens & Gianopoulos (2007) 'Acceptability, benefit and costs of early screening for hearing disability: a study of potential screening tests and models' p.ix

⁸ Applying a discount rate of 3.5%. The study can be found here. London Economics (2010) "Cost benefit analysis of hearing screening for older people"

⁹Helvik, Sofie-Ann et al (2013)'Hearing loss and risk of early retirement. The HUNT study' p.617-620

¹⁰ National Council of Aging (200) in Action on Hearing Loss – Hearing Matters p.44

to suggest that support with hearing loss can empower people to make choices about whether or not they wish to stay in work as opposed to retire early because they are unaware of what has caused their lack of confidence¹¹.

Therefore, as stated in our answer to Question One, hearing screening and support for hearing loss is cost-effective and should be accessible to all older people. Older people and especially those beyond state pension age are more likely to have hearing loss and therefore should be supported and get the help they both deserve and are entitled to.

Employers can help older employees better understand the importance of hearing, hearing loss and support/correction. By doing so those workers that wish to continue working will get the support they need and will not be forced to retire because of a lack of information or access to hearing services.

Q3: What are the most effective and cost-effective ways of helping older workers plan and prepare for retirement?

Older workers should also be encouraged and supported by good employers to do more to prevent ill health in the future. Maintaining independence into older age is important if people are to be fit and healthy when they decide to retire.

As stated in our answers to Question One and Two, older people should be made aware of the benefits of early detection and support for hearing loss. The most common cause of hearing loss is age and yet today many older people delay for up to 10 years after the onset of symptoms to seek help¹.

Making older people more aware of age-related hearing loss at every opportunity can help overcome this growing public health concern. Engaging with older workers through employers is a valuable way to ensure workers are well prepared for retirement. As our responses has shown

- unaided hearing loss has an impact on mental wellbeing
- hearing screening and interventions do offset these risks and
- hearing screening and interventions for hearing loss are cost effective for older people

¹¹[Shield \(2006\) "Evaluation of the Social and Economic Cost of Hearing Impairment - a report for hear-it"](#)

¹²Dawes et al. 'Hearing in Middle Age: A Population Snapshot of 40- to 69-Year Olds in the United Kingdom'. Ear and Hearing, 2014; 1 DOI: [10.1097/AUD.000000000000010](#)

¹³Dane J. Genther et al. Association of Hearing Loss With Hospitalization and Burden of Disease in Older Adults. *JAMA*, 2013; 309 (22):

¹⁴Morris et al. An economic evaluation of screening 60- to 70-year old adults for hearing loss. *Journal of Public Health*, 2013; Vol. 35, No. 1, pp. 139–146

Therefore we encourage NICE to issue guidance on the importance of hearing screening and support for hearing loss for all older people in work and those wishing to return to work.