

EVENT REPORT**Healthcare access for all?****What are the barriers to hearing health for Europe's citizens?**

On December 6, MED-EL, an Austrian global innovation leader in Cochlear Implants, organised a high-level debate in Brussels to discuss the importance of ensuring hearing health for all EU citizens. The event was timed to celebrate the end of the Austrian Presidency which had placed access at the centre of its healthcare priorities and activities.

The high-level debate was led by a strong panellist of MEP Heinz K. Becker (European People's Party, Austria), Martina Madeo from Advantage Austria/WKO, Professor Paul Van de Heyning from the University of Antwerp and expert of the HEARRING group, Teresa Amat, President of EURO-CIU and MED-EL's Director of Awareness and Public Affairs, Patrick D'Haese.

The debate became a launch pad for 2019's continued mission to ensure greater access to hearing prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and care, for Europe's citizens. The overarching message of the debate was that hearing loss is a silent burden on Europe's economy, society and on individual health, and that a key issue to addressing this is lack of awareness of the impact of the condition, limiting early intervention and treatment options.

An expanded summary of the key takeaways can be found below.

1) Hearing loss is a widespread problem affecting a large proportion of the global population however knowledge about it is very limited

In Europe 10% of the total population (52 million people) self-report to experience hearing loss, 73% consult a medical professional, but only 50% are referred to hearing care professionals: limiting its management. Hearing loss threatens to put huge pressure on Europe's health and social care systems if left untreated, due to its associated comorbidities. Furthermore, given the rapid ageing of the global population, and a strong link between ageing and hearing loss, we can only expect the number of those experiencing the condition to increase. This makes the need to promote hearing care as a right for all citizens, even more prominent. Participants of the debate acknowledged that there is a lack of awareness of the impact of hearing loss, which inhibits its treatment and care.

2) Hearing loss has a profound impact on an individual's health, the European economy and society

The burden of untreated hearing loss is associated with multiple adverse health, economic and social effects. In terms of its impact on health and comorbidities, Van de Heyning cited studies by Lin et al. which found that hearing loss accelerated cognitive decline by 24% compared to people with normal hearing. Specifically, hearing loss is related to a decline in memory and attention capabilities. Furthermore, there is also a link between hearing loss and type 2 diabetes and more frequent falls. Amat went on to highlight the economic effect on workers with hearing loss who experience over-exertion, low job performance and even job loss. Furthermore, Amat highlighted that hearing loss is associated with economic costs of EUR 30 billion in Germany, EUR 22 billion in France, EUR 22 billion in Italy and EUR 3 billion in Austria. Hearing loss is often related to social isolation as it makes participation in social events and community life more difficult. This can lead to fractured personal and family relationships and even depression. Therefore, the increasing prevalence of hearing loss will put strain on Member States through decreased taxable incomes and increase spending on health and social care.

3) Cochlear Implantation is a cost-effective way to tackle hearing loss but barriers to treatment remain

Cochlear implants (CIs), which replace the function of the damaged inner ear and can treat those who only benefit in a limited way from a hearing aid, were praised as an effective and cost-efficient measure to treat hearing loss. For young people, CIs can facilitate social inclusion, for adults they can improve performance in the workplace and for older people they can slow down cognitive decline. Amat reiterated however that the CI is

not a magical solution and requires support and supplementary treatments. Furthermore, national healthcare budgets must make the funds available for treatment, as well as introduce national screening, and limit long waiting lists. The absence of such support has led to several barriers to accessing this treatment which has exasperated the burden of untreated hearing loss.

4) A glance at required policy actions

MEP Becker stated that there is a need for policy-makers to recognise the importance of treating hearing loss and give greater focus and support for cochlear implants as well as other treatments. He explained that pressure should be put on Member States, through highlighting the cost of hearing loss, with the **aim of establishing early diagnosis and prevention as targets of investment and key tools of implementation**. Furthermore, the new Parliament is an opportunity to continue to raise awareness and build new champions of the issue. Action towards hearing loss is not the responsibility of industry, but the responsibility of policy-makers.

From a patient perspective, Amat also highlighted that the EURO CIU would like to see a stronger Accessibility Act which enshrines consumer rights for users which will force producers to consider them in their products. Reminding policy-makers that the 52 million people that experience hearing loss, are also voters.

Ultimately, the importance that this condition warrants is not being realised by policy-makers, and greater awareness needs to be raised amongst them for them to take action. MED-EL will continue to work with this group of key stakeholders throughout 2019 and beyond, to ensure that awareness of hearing loss continues to be raised, and that Europe can get a step closer to taking prioritising the hearing health of its citizens.