

Policy position: improving tinnitus services

Action on Hearing Loss Northern Ireland is calling for improvements to tinnitus services, so that people with the condition have the best chance of managing it successfully in the longer term.

In Northern Ireland, up to 275,000 people have tinnitus.¹ At least 7,000 of those people are severely affected,² the condition having a significant impact on their ability to lead a normal life.

Many people do not know where to seek support for tinnitus, or are getting a negative prognosis when they do approach healthcare services.

Background

Tinnitus, often described as ‘ringing in the ears’, is the perception of sound in the head or ears when no external sound is present. It is generally related to hearing loss, but the two can exist separately. The sound can be constant, giving the individual no relief, except when asleep, or can occur for several minutes to hours at a time, with pauses between episodes.

According to our 2010 research report *What’s That Noise?*,³ tinnitus causes most concern for people in the period following onset. In some cases people who develop tinnitus may not know that the noise they are hearing is tinnitus. It’s important that people seek help at the earliest opportunity, and that they’re given a range of support services while waiting for treatment.

However, the research revealed gaps in the provision of tinnitus services in Northern Ireland and a lack of information, for professionals and patients, about additional support.

¹El Refaie, A. E., Davis, A., Kayan, Baskill, A., Lovell, E., Owen, V. (2004), ‘A questionnaire study of the quality of family life of individuals complaining of tinnitus pre- and post- attendance at a tinnitus clinic’, *International Journal of Audiology*, 43, 410-416

²Erlandsson, S. I., Hallberg, L. R-M. (2000), ‘Prediction of quality of life in patients with tinnitus’, *British Journal of Audiology*, 34, 11-20

³*What’s that Noise? A profile of personal and professional experience of tinnitus in NI*, RNID, 2010, www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/how-we-help/information-and-resources/publications/research-reports/what-s-that-noise-report

Often, when people with tinnitus first seek help, they're told that there's nothing that can be done, and that they should try to become accustomed to it. Such negative messages at diagnosis, combined with delays in receiving support, can increase people's anxiety and/or bring on depression.

People with severe and chronic tinnitus can experience great distress, find it difficult to cope with daily life and may develop mental health problems as a result. In Northern Ireland, for these people in particular, there is a lack of appropriate services and necessary expertise.

Latest developments

Action on Hearing Loss Northern Ireland, working with a group of experts from across health and social care services and service users, published *A Tinnitus Strategy for Northern Ireland*⁴ in 2013. The document outlined a new patient pathway, recommending that people get support in their local area from appropriately trained professionals and joined-up services.

In response to successful lobbying, the Health and Social Care Board established a multiagency Tinnitus Strategy Group to take forward the strategy's recommendations. While there has been some progress in the provision of information to patients and GPs, a lack of government funding has prevented the strategy being implemented in full.

We're calling for:

- Every Health and Social Care Trust to ensure that resources are put in place to deliver an accessible, specialist and joined-up tinnitus service across health and social care providers.
- Every Health and Social Care Trust to create a referral pathway from GPs to their tinnitus service.
- Urgent government investment in a service to meet the specific needs of people with severe tinnitus and related mental health problems.

For further information on the Improved Tinnitus Services campaign, please contact:

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⁴A *Tinnitus Strategy for Northern Ireland* (2013), www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/how-we-help/information-and-resources/publications/research-reports/a-tinnitus-strategy-for-northern-ireland