

Lunch Debate from the European Parliament for World Hearing Day 2025

Report by Mark Laureyns



The Lunch Debate from the European Parliament for World Hearing Day 2025, with the theme “Changing mindsets: Empower yourself to make ear and hearing care a reality for all” and with special focus on Employment, was hosted by MEP Zala Tomasic (EPP) from Slovenia and was organised by AEA (European Association of Hearing Aid Professionals), EFHOH (European Federation of Hard of Hearing People) and EHIMA (European Hearing Instrument Manufacturers Association) in strong cooperation with the World Health Organization on Tuesday the 4th of March.

In total 140 participants from 30 countries around the globe (Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Colombia, Denmark, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Lesotho, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom and the United States) participated in this year’s debate.



Welcome – MEP Zala Tomasic (EPP Slovenia – Host of this Lunch Debate)

MEP Tomasic, is very much connected to the topic of the lunch debate, since she had the opportunity to observe her mother’s journey, recognizing her fears and the challenges she faced. The constant fear of missing out or misunderstanding important information, difficulties in the workplace, barriers in education, lost opportunities for career advancement, and social

withdrawal, the everyday realities for hard-of-hearing individuals. She also witnessed her mother's journey from complete hearing loss to her return to the world of sound after receiving cochlear implants. She stated that, in order to facilitate employment for people with hearing loss, we need a strong support system for employers, one that not only offers financial incentives but also educates employees about communication strategies, necessary accommodations when required, and much-needed training for everyone involved. It is crucial that EU member states recognize hearing loss as an urgent issue, not just a health and social concern but also an economic one, and introduce appropriate preventive programs and actions, as we know that prevention is of paramount importance. Emphasis must also be placed on providing quality care for people with hearing loss, including technical aids, psychosocial support, and proper rehabilitation. Hearing loss is not just a personal issue—it affects society as a whole. When we recognize that each individual has their own limitations but also unique talents, we can learn to accept both ourselves and others in all our diversity.



WHO World Hearing Day 2025 theme “Changing Mindsets” - Shelly Chadha – (Technical lead for ear and hearing care at World Health Organization in Geneva)

In a brief survey that she undertook with an undergraduate student when she was still working in India, in 2007 they interviewed 100 adults and asked them three simple questions; if they knew what the status of their blood pressure is, if they knew what their vision is like, and lastly, if they knew their hearing status. The results were that while most older adults knew about their blood pressure or their vision status, they were unaware either about their hearing status or the importance of it.

This brings us really to the theme of this World Hearing Day 2025, “Changing mindsets, empower yourself to make ear and hearing care a reality”. We are trying to change or influence, the **“3P’s”**: People, Providers, and Policy makers.

“People”: Society that celebrates and enjoys many of the risk factors that are leading persistently to hearing loss, such as listening to music, playing video games with their headphones on and so on. Mindsets that trivialize hearing loss. It's a part of life, you will get used to it, it's nothing, so you don't need to do anything about it. And as a result of these mindsets people often wait as long as 10 years to start using hearing aids from the time that they actually need them.

“Providers”: Healthcare providers, often provide misinformation to patients or parents, telling them that, she's too little to get a hearing test, or it's not urgent, wait a while, maybe she'll start speaking, etc. As a result, in places where newborn hearing screening is not systematized, children wait to almost three years old to be diagnosed and to start intervention, while the recommendation is to start intervention by three months of age. It's also mindsets amongst healthcare providers who often say that, well, you have good hearing for your age, or when a

comprehensive health checkup is to be conducted, conveniently leave out hearing tests, because that is not so important.

“Policy makers”: A survey conducted not long back showed that out of 100 national health policies that were assessed, only one of them significantly mentions ear or hearing problems. The outcome of this is that hearing loss and unaddressed hearing loss are on the rise. Even though we have all the solutions required to prevent hearing loss, required to identify hearing loss, either in an infant or in an older adult, in any situation and to address hearing loss.

We need to create a change, so empowered mindsets will consider safe listening, where musicians use earplugs and promoting their use amongst their audiences, where hearing screening and care is considered important and gets the attention it deserves, and health care providers take action to address hearing loss. Mindsets amongst policy makers where hearing care is considered an essential part of healthcare and of universal health coverage.

What we now need to do is to take strong action to make our voices heard amongst people, healthcare providers and policymakers, decision makers. Today, World Hearing Day is our opportunity to do so.



The EU Disability Employment Package - Monika Chaba – European Commission (European Commission's Employment and Social Affairs Directorate General.)

Monika Chaba focusses on the European Commission’s disability employment package which is one of the seven flagship initiatives of the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities for the years 2021-2030 and aims at empowering not only persons with disabilities, but also employers, public authorities, civil society and all the actors who can help, who can support persons with disabilities to get quality jobs, to maintain these jobs and all to return to employment.

Out of 48 million of persons with disabilities of working age only about half are in employment and a lot of them almost 40% is inactive. And when persons with disabilities are in employment, their employment is not of very high quality, which means a lot of them are working in precarious employment, on short-term contracts or in sheltered employment. So we've decided to focus on employment in the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

On the EU level, the legal basis is the Employment Equality Directive from the year 2000 which prohibits discrimination in employment also on the basis of disabilities. The “Disability Employment Package”, is a set of guidance and practices, which are needed, since there is little awareness of the Employment Equality Directive and of what it implies, who is responsible for what, at what stage of recruitment or employment.

The package focuses comprehensively on all stages of employment, from recruitment and career guidance, through hiring, through the provision of reasonable accommodation, through

retention of persons with disabilities in employment, return to work and also alternative employment and transition from alternative employment to the open labour market. In the package we also try to fight the stereotypes both about the potential of persons with disabilities but also about the cost of adapting either working schedule or workplaces.

All the deliverables of the package are available on the website where you can [download](#) the guidelines and the examples and to share because we have developed all those guidelines together with different stakeholders including EFHOH and I thank you very much for your valuable contribution and the focus on hard-of-hearing persons and persons who are deaf.



Hard of Hearing people in employment - implementing inclusive approach – Lidia Best (President of the European Federation of Hard of Hearing People - EFHOH)

The EFHOH collective vision is “A Europe where hard-of-hearing people can live without barriers and have the opportunity to participate in all levels of society”.

In 2018, EFHOH has published a late deafened report related to people who lost their hearing later in their life. 67 % of our responders reported difficulty in finding a job. They also came across communication barriers, discrimination, bias during hiring processes and limited career advancement opportunities and the fact that often people with hearing loss actually do low-pay jobs. There were accessibility issues, such as lack of assistive technologies and accommodations in a workplace. Finally, stigma, which has always been coming across the majority of different surveys from different organisations and different institutions. And that is feeling ashamed, fear of rejection by peers and society. It is quite common, but the majority of people with hearing loss will actually not say that they have a hearing loss when approaching the new employer.

We observe listening fatigue and concentration fatigue. Hard of hearing people find it tiring to listen to everyone all day and at the end, often they just pull out from any socialization or just by end of the working day, they just feel too tired to even try to understand what people are saying to them.

What can be used for inclusive practice in employment to ensure that persons with hearing loss can be fully supported and can feel included in the workplace?

1. Communication support: Providing speech to text support or interpreters for meetings, training sessions, and other events
2. Assistive Listening Devices: Providing devices such as FM systems, infrared systems, or induction loops to enhance hearing
3. Communication Methods: Using email, instant messaging, or other text-based communication tools instead of phone calls or verbal instructions
4. Flexible Work Arrangements: Adjusting work schedules, remote working or job duties to better accommodate communication needs

5. Office Arrangements: Adjusted seating plans, quiet areas
6. Providing materials ahead of the meetings
7. Captioned Media: Ensuring all training video content is captioned to make it accessible
8. Most of all, ask the person “What works?”

Equitable access to hearing aids and cochlear implant supports inclusion, confidence and boost employment. Investing in hearing care services is vital to maintaining independence, signposting to organizations and services.

Out of 59 million Europeans with hearing loss, only 22 % of them use hearing aids, which means that there is a large unmet need for hearing care support in Europe. How is this possible? Especially if you want people to work and to stay in employment.

It's important to gain access to audiologists, to hearing care professionals, because they are able to give tips, guidance, assistance and advice on how to manage hearing loss and to understand what is happening to them, how they can adapt themselves to using the new technology, hearing technology, such as hearing aids, in daily life.

The WHO “World Report on Hearing Report” states that in the European Region, for every euro spent, the return on investment is 30 euros over 10 years. So it makes sense to invest and support hard of hearing people in the services and any support we need. Empower yourself with the information, with support that is available, and work together with a person with hearing loss.



Advocacy / multi-sectoral action for change - Ariane Laplante-Lévesque (Technical Advisor in Eye and Ear Care - WHO European Region)

The WHO Regional Office for Europe provides technical support to 53 member states of Europe, as well as Central Asia, towards strengthening health systems. My role is specifically about integrating person-centered ear and eye care within the national health systems of the member states that we serve.

We know that hearing loss is very prevalent and that hearing loss, if unaddressed, has important negative consequences. It has solved for the individual, for people around them, and for society at large. We estimate by 2030 there'll be over 500 million people worldwide that will be having a disabling hearing loss that requires rehabilitation. And we know also that currently there's over 1 billion young people that are facing the risk of permanent hearing loss due to long-term exposure to loud sounds. It could be during recreational activities, such as listening to music or playing video games.

There are many cases of hearing loss that can be prevented. There's around 80 % of cases of ear and hearing conditions that can be addressed in primary care. And with early treatment, the negative impact of hearing loss can be largely mitigated. So, the future is also bright.

She presented examples of national activities that WHO is supporting in the country of Central Asia to improve access to assistive technology, and that includes, of course, hearing assistive technology.

The World Report on Hearing that was published in 2021 outlines a vision for integrated person-centered ear and hearing care and it proposed prioritized ear and hearing care interventions and they're very clever because they make up the acronym HEARING.

H: Hearing screening and prevention, of course, of newborns, infants, children before school and at school, but also adults and older adults and people at risk, for example, due to noise exposure.

E: Ear disease prevention and management so that common ear disease, such as middle ear infections, are prevented where possible.

A: Access to assistive technology, so that affordable, high-quality hearing aids, hearing implants are accessible, as well as other forms of hearing-assisted technology.

R: Rehabilitation Services, so that services are family-centered, they're multidisciplinary for children, as well as for adults with hearing loss.

I: Improving communication, that includes offering captioning services, just like today, as well as sign language, learning the language for people who need access to sign language, as well as interpretation services, especially in key settings such as education and health care.

N: Noise reduction, of course in the workplace, but also in leisure activities, and also with programs that are aiming specifically young adults and children.

G: Greater community engagement. The idea of communicating widely around healthy ear and hearing and access to ear and hearing care, as well as threatening organizations and associations that represent users and really making sure that we collaborate would all stakeholders to identify ways forward just like we're doing today.



The consequences of hearing loss on employment – Mark Laureyns (President of the European Association of Hearing Aid Professionals - AEA)

The presentation starts with a true story, of a young dynamic man, who builds his career, but due to sudden hearing loss, needs to give up his job. It describes the journey towards using hearing aids, a cochlear implant and building a new future. This young man was installed recently, as the new Belgian Minister for Consumer Protection, People with Disability and Equal Opportunities, and to Combat Social Fraud. His name is Rob Beenders and we strongly recommend you to read his book “My Hearing Challenge”.

What are the research findings on the relation between hearing loss and employment?

- WHO World Report on Hearing 2021: An association between hearing loss and employment in adults is evident. Overall adults with hearing loss have increased odds of unemployment and underemployment.
- Systematic review 2020: The highest quality studies currently available indicate that adult-onset hearing loss is associated with unemployment
- There is a significant difference in the prevalence of hearing problems between those with higher burnout scores compared to those with lower scores
- Primary Burnout Signals are associated with measured Noise Acceptance, self-reported Noise Acceptance, Understanding in Noise, Auditory Concentration and Tinnitus
- The Netherlands National Longitudinal Study, which is running since 2005, concluded that a 5-year change in speech recognition in noise showed a statistically significant association with 5-year change in need for Recovery after Work and adults with impaired hearing ability are more likely to be Unemployed or Unfit for Work and need more time to recuperate from work.

At the end, the recent campaign “Hearing Loss is Never Normal”, which is launch at World Hearing Day 2025, by the Belgian National Hearing Insurance is presented. General Practitioners and First Line Health Workers, need to “Detect”, “Discuss” and “Take Action” for Hearing Loss, in order to reduce or avoid the consequences of Untreated Hearing Loss.



The role of hearing health in employment and job retention – Stefan Zimmer (Secretary General of the European Hearing Instrument Manufacturers Association - EHIMA)

The World Health Organization reported in 2020 that adults with hearing loss have increased odds of unemployment or underemployment. The global annual cost of hearing loss through productivity and workforce reductions is estimated as high as \$182.5 billion dollars.

A study that EHIMA conducted back in 2019 found that only 64 % of people with hearing loss at working age were in employment compared to 77 % of the general population. The study comes to the conclusion that the loss of productivity due to higher unemployment that disabling hearing loss amounts to 55 billion euros annually.



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We are seeing an aging population, hearing loss prevalence increases with age, if this hearing loss stays untreated, it's uncared for, it is linked to higher unemployment and underemployment. This all leads to rising expenses for untreated hearing loss, shrinking workforce, lower productivity.

And I'm not naive to say that we can turn this around by hearing care fully. Of course not, but I think we can contribute to reversing this trend at least a bit by more and earlier professional hearing care.

Hearing and balance systems are connected so when we talk about enhancing the sense of hearing it also has might have positive effects on the balance system. Untreated hearing loss can increase the risk of falls by a significant 30%. The more severe our hearing loss is, the more chances of fall increase. Wearing hearing aids can reduce our risk of falling by as much as 50%, and by doing this possibly preventing, fall accidents that might reduce the rate of work injuries, work accidents and it might keep people healthier in their job and in employment.

The data for the next findings stem from nine European countries, from Western Europe: Belgium, France, Southern Europe: Spain, Portugal, Italy, and from Northern Europe: Denmark and Central Europe, Germany, and Poland. All recent data from the EuroTrak surveys that EHIMA conducts since the year 2009.

We asked people self-reporting hearing loss but not using hearing aids and a second group self-reporting hearing loss and using hearing aids if they often feel physically exhausted in the evening. Of the group of non-users 57 % answered yes, compared to 37% of the hearing aid users.

Stress in its non-physical, in its mental dimension. We asked do you feel mentally exhausted in the evening? Of the group of non-users 48 % answered yes, compared to 30% of the hearing aid users. Now what's the consequence of stress, either physical or mental?

If you're stressed, you have an elevated level of stress, that is significantly associated with poor quality of sleep and poor sleep quality can contribute to absenteeism, an impairment of cognitive functions, an increase of the risk of accidents and injuries, and it might, it might reduce the overall work performance. We asked if they're generally satisfied with their quality of sleep. Of the group of non-users 56 % answered no, compared to 36 % of the hearing aid users.

We asked people to summarize their impression of whether or not their hearing aids are useful on the job and 93 % says yes, at least of some use, most of them said of significant use, are hearing aids on the job.

What are the take-aways?

Especially when you're 50 years and older and you want to stay healthily and happily employed, get your hearing checked, ideally regularly, not just once.

Then, if there's something off with your hearing, either because your partner says it, your work colleagues say it, or yourself, feel it, or it's the result of your hearing test, seek an early diagnosis.

Everybody that we surveyed says, well, I regret not having taken action earlier than I did.

And if there is need to take action, there's need for taking rehabilitative measures, go and seek professional hearing care early.

And then if you are prescribed hearing aids, wear them throughout the day on and off the job.

We see a positive correlation of hours worn and overall satisfaction not only on the job but with quality of life and the hearing aids in total.



Debate & Conclusion

After the presentations, the questions posted in the Q&A were discussed by the panel and MEP Zala Tomasic concluded the lunch debate, by stating that she was very happy to learn that there is such a big interest from the participants. Prevention is really important. And we can also see it with people of her generation that are not aware. The panel members have talked about very complex issues, in a very understanding way even if somebody that is not familiar with the terms and medicine can follow. It is crucial for the future. She has learned so much in listening to all of them. Thank you to all, the organiser, the speakers, and are very happy to have been the host, and I hope it was helpful.