

MEDIA RELEASE

WORLD HEARING DAY: ‘Prevention and early identification are crucial to combating avoidable hearing loss’ – WHO Collaborating Centre for Prevention of Deafness and Hearing Loss at UP

The World Health Organisation’s (WHO) Collaborating Centre for the Prevention of Deafness and Hearing Loss at the University of Pretoria (UP) once again joined the WHO in its annual observance of World Hearing Day on 3 March.

Formed in 2018, the centre is the only one of its kind in Africa, and has worked closely with the WHO to drive initiatives that create awareness around preventable hearing loss in both South Africa and the broader African context, and to develop technologies that enable more affordable access to hearing screening and rehabilitation.

World Hearing Day aims to raise awareness of the largely unrecognised epidemic of preventable hearing loss that is affecting an increasing number of people, both young and old, worldwide.

The WHO estimates that more than 5% of the world’s population (about 432 million adults and 34 million children) require rehabilitation to address disabling hearing loss. And they believe that these numbers are going to get worse, with more than 700 million – or one in every 10 – people expected to experience disabling hearing loss by 2050. The vast majority of those who suffer preventable hearing loss live in low- and middle-income countries, and are unable to access reliable, affordable hearing services.

The slogan for this year’s World Hearing Day was, “To hear for life, listen with care.” The emphasis was on safe listening practices to prevent avoidable hearing loss and to maintain good hearing for life. Noise-induced hearing loss is second only to hearing loss that results from untreated or poorly managed ear infections. As part of its previously launched Make Listening Safe initiative, the WHO released several guidelines and communication tools to help with advocacy and awareness around safe listening. Of particular concern are young people, with the WHO estimating that one billion people between the ages of 12 and 35 are at risk of developing hearing loss due to unsafe listening practices. Although consistent exposure to any loud noise can cause hearing loss, young people are particularly at risk because of high volumes in recreational settings, such as music or entertainment venues, and the incorrect use of headphones or earphones.

Professor De Wet Swanepoel, head of the research group at UP’s Collaborating Centre for the Prevention of Deafness and Hearing Loss, said that the events planned by the centre around World Hearing Day emphasised the need for prevention and early detection of changes in hearing. The first event was a screening project in partnership with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and took place over two days at two different schools. Angie Motshekga, Minister for Basic Education, attended the event at Westbury Primary School in Johannesburg, where Grades 1 to 3 learners were screened by UP students.

The collaborating centre has been a leader in the development of mobile technologies to screen hearing, and the app that UP students used to screen learners was developed by the centre's research group in partnership with the hearX Group. It takes about a minute to do the screening. "This technology uses a mobile phone with headphones, and it allows us to do the screening very quickly and accurately," Prof Swanepoel says. This two-day screening project showcased the technology to the DBE, demonstrating that screening can be both accessible and affordable.

Another aim of these screenings was to raise awareness of the crucial importance of identifying hearing loss as early as possible in young children, as educational success can be severely hampered by impaired hearing. "School-based screening programmes are so important, because we are able to identify [hearing loss] early and manage it appropriately so that kids can have the best possible outcomes thereafter," Prof Swanepoel says. "If you don't hear well, you can't learn well."

The detection of hearing loss has implications for adults too. Prof Swanepoel's message to adults is simple: know your hearing status. Undiagnosed or untreated hearing loss is associated with multiple negative impacts on quality of life. Adults with hearing loss are more likely to be unemployed or to be employed in low-income jobs than those without hearing loss; they are also more likely to experience social isolation, loneliness and stigmatisation.

Hearing loss can also impact negatively on mental health; for example, there is a three-fold increase in the risk of developing dementia among adults with untreated hearing loss. "The Lancet Commission on Dementia has identified intervention for hearing loss – hearing aids – in midlife as the number one modifiable risk factor we can change in an individual's midlife to prevent cognitive decline and dementia," Prof Swanepoel says.

A free mobile app called hearWHO that screens for hearing loss is based on research conducted by Prof Swanepoel. The app, which can be downloaded from Android or iOS app stores, has been used to screen more than 300 000 people in more than 191 countries around the world.

The second event that the centre held to observe World Hearing Day was a webinar hosted by Prof Swanepoel. Titled 'Hear for life: strategies to prevent hearing loss', the webinar focused on prevention and, in line with the WHO's key focus this year, emphasised safe listening practices. For those with hearing loss, early identification as a critical strategy was discussed as the second step in prevention. A link to a recording of the seminar can be found below.

Follow these links for additional information:

- 'Hear for life: strategies to prevent hearing loss' webinar, hosted by Prof Swanepoel: <https://youtu.be/Q0rEYrW4FDI>
- World Hearing Day 2022: <https://www.who.int/campaigns/world-hearing-day/2022>
- Media brief by WHO on #safelistening: <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/media-brief-on-safelistening>
- 2021 World Report on Hearing: <https://www.who.int/teams/noncommunicable-diseases/sensory-functions-disability-and-rehabilitation/highlighting-priorities-for-ear-and-hearing-care>

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 114-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In May 2020, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

For more information, go to www.up.ac.za