

Hearing loss may contribute to lost income

By Jennifer Bentley, Au.D.

When the topic of hearing loss comes up in conversation, most people don't think twice about it, dismissing it as problem faced by "old" people, more of an inconvenience than a real health issue.

The fact is, hearing loss is a serious condition affecting nearly 30 million Americans. Studies report that one out of six baby boomers (ages 42 to 60) and one out of 14 in the Gen X population (ages 30 to 41) are affected by hearing loss. Given those age breakdowns, it is fair to assume that most of these individuals are still active in the workforce.

For this large portion of the work force hearing loss is more than inconvenient. If left untreated, even a mild hearing loss can jeopardize safety and cost them and their employers dearly. In terms of safety, consider this: a person with untreated hearing loss, regardless of age, is given instructions to take medicine at a specific time and in a certain dosage. If those instructions are not crystal clear, the results can be life threatening. Add in other factors, such as the noise from the hospital emergency room, or a crying toddler and the difficulty of hearing proper instructions increases.

The danger in these scenarios doesn't even factor in the ability to hear sirens, smoke alarms, baby cries, car horns and other alerting signals. The more significant the hearing loss, the greater the risk to oneself or others, and that's more than an inconvenience.

In addition to safety, job security and income for an employee with untreated hearing loss may be at risk. Consider a scenario where a boss gives a series of instructions and deadlines to a staff person. Even a mild hearing loss could impair the employee's ability to hear the details correctly. This puts the project at risk and may even jeopardize that person's job.

A survey conducted by the **Better Hearing Institute** (www.betterhearing.org) indicated, "Working Americans who ignore their hearing problems are collectively losing at least \$100 billion a year in earnings." The survey showed that "Even with people with mild hearing loss, who may miss a consonant here or a word there, may lose income if they can't

completely grasp the latest news at the water cooler or a phone message from the boss."

The report goes on to estimate that the average worker with untreated hearing loss loses from \$1,000 a year for those with mild hearing loss to \$12,000 a year for those with profound loss.

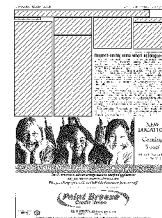
The financial impact of untreated hearing loss is certainly not limited to the employee. Employers with employees who have untreated hearing loss may lose income as well. If an employee misunderstands instructions or misses important information in a meeting or during a conversation with a customer, business may be lost.

Given the fact that most hearing loss is noise induced, contrary to years of thinking it was related to age, it is not likely that the number of people suffering from hearing loss will decline in our noisy society. As a matter of fact, there is an epidemic of hearing loss in young people, with reports indicating that children as young as 7 are being diagnosed in unprecedented numbers with noise induced hearing loss. The impact of this epidemic, of course, is yet to be a reality for employers.

It is easy to be proactive in addressing hearing loss in the workplace. The best place for individuals and businesses alike to begin is with a hearing loss awareness program. In terms of prevention, hearing conservation programs are recommended for noisy businesses. When around high levels of occupational noise, employees' hearing sensitivity should be monitored annually. In low noise environments, such as an office building, employers should include hearing loss awareness education as part of their worksite wellness programs.

In terms of proactive treatment, encourage employees to get their hearing checked and treated if a loss does exist. Offering to help pay or share the cost of hearing aids or other assistive listening devices could speak volumes about an employer's commitment to staff and hearing health. Such minor investments on the part of the business can be huge in terms of employee loyalty and enhancing morale.

Businesses also can take steps to make it easier for employees with hearing loss to



hear more efficiently. For instance, offer phone amplifiers, install loop systems in meeting rooms and encourage greater sensitivity and awareness among all staff members, offering tips or training to help them communicate more effectively with co-workers who have hearing loss.

Jennifer Bentley is a Doctor of Audiology at the Hearing Assessment Center, which has offices in Bel Air and throughout the Baltimore area. May is Better Speech and Hearing Month.