

Addressing Pediatric Hearing Impairment in Nepal: A Critical Public Health Concern

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Pediatric hearing impairment poses a significant threat to child development in Nepal, impacting communication, learning, and social interaction. Despite advancements in healthcare, this issue remains under-recognized, with profound consequences for affected children. This article explores the challenges surrounding pediatric hearing health in Nepal, highlights barriers to early detection and intervention, and proposes urgent actions to address this critical public health concern.

Prevalence and Burden of Hearing Impairment:

Globally, an estimated 34 million children experience hearing loss, with a disproportionate burden in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (WHO, 2021).¹ While comprehensive national data on pediatric hearing loss in Nepal is limited, existing studies suggest a significant problem with 5.7% prevalence of hearing loss among rural Nepalese children, indicating a widespread issue.² However, underdiagnosis is likely due to limited access to healthcare, particularly in remote areas, and the absence of systematic hearing screening programs. This diagnostic delay hinders timely interventions, crucial for mitigating the long-term consequences of hearing loss on speech, language, cognitive development, academic performance, and psychosocial well-being.

Impact of Untreated Hearing Loss:

Untreated hearing loss has far-reaching consequences. Delayed speech and language development impede educational attainment and social integration. These children may experience cognitive and academic delays, impacting their long-term prospects. Moreover, untreated hearing loss can contribute to emotional and psychological issues, including social isolation, anxiety, and depression. In Nepal, children with hearing impairments often face marginalization, discrimination, and limited educational opportunities.³ Timely interventions, such as hearing aids or cochlear implants, can significantly improve quality of life. However, without early identification, many children miss the opportunity for these life-changing interventions. Accessible diagnostic services and affordable interventions are urgently needed.

Barriers to Early Detection and Intervention:

A significant barrier is the lack of widespread newborn hearing screening programs. While routine in many developed countries, newborn hearing screening coverage in Nepal is estimated to be low. This results in delayed diagnoses, often after irreversible developmental impacts have occurred. The shortage of trained audiologists and other healthcare professionals, particularly in rural areas, further limits access to audiology services and delays diagnosis and treatment. Additionally, the high cost of hearing aids and cochlear implants, coupled with limited insurance coverage, restricts access to these essential interventions.

Public Health Strategies for Intervention:

Addressing pediatric hearing loss requires a comprehensive public health approach encompassing prevention, early detection, and intervention. Universal newborn hearing screening programs should be implemented in all healthcare facilities. The good part is now the Nepal government is implementing universal neonatal hearing screening in government hospitals.

Investing in training programs for healthcare professionals (pediatricians, nurses, community health workers) to recognize signs of hearing loss and provide appropriate referrals is crucial. Public awareness campaigns targeting parents and communities should emphasize the risks of hearing loss, the importance of early intervention, and promote preventive measures such as vaccination during pregnancy, proper management of ear infections, and safe listening practices. Financial support for hearing aids and cochlear implants, potentially through government initiatives or public-private partnerships, is essential to improve affordability and access.

Pediatric hearing loss is a critical public health issue demanding urgent attention in Nepal. The long-term consequences of untreated hearing impairment are substantial. Implementing universal newborn hearing screening, training healthcare professionals, raising public awareness, and providing financial support for hearing devices are essential steps. Through concerted efforts by the government, healthcare providers, and the community, Nepal can significantly improve hearing health outcomes for children and ensure their opportunity for a fulfilling life.

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