

Hearing well again is music to his ears

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ADAM YIP

'There was definitely a social price to pay from hearing loss,' says part-time Sydney musician Chris Sommerville

Four million Australians — nearly one person in six — suffer from hearing loss but many wait as long as a decade to seek help, causing potentially worse problems, specialists say.

During that seven to 10-year period, many who need treatment become more isolated, more anxious and are at increased risk of a number of diseases, including dementia and cardiovascular disease, says Audiology Australia president Barbra Timmer.

"That means that during this time, their hearing is getting worse, they are probably getting more socially isolated, may be less engaged with their family and friends and may have increased problems with other issues such as balance, cognition etc," she said.

It's an impairment that costs the nation about \$1.1bn each year in productivity and informal care, Dr Timmer said.

And Australia isn't alone in suffering from the fallout.

The issue is one of global concern, and a catalyst behind a new World Health Organisation report on dealing with hearing loss.

The report notes that in recent years the world has witnessed a number of "game-changing advances in the field of hearing technology" that enable specialists to identify ear disease, hearing loss and other factors that contribute to hearing loss.

It also highlights self-induced noise damage, estimating that more than 50 per cent of people between the ages of 12 and 35 listen to music at dangerous levels through personal audio devices.

"Unaddressed, hearing loss imposes a global cost of more than \$US980bn (\$1.25 trillion) annually," the report said.

WHO estimates that 40 per cent of people who frequent entertainment venues are at risk of hearing loss.

Sydney musician Chris Sommerville, 61, is one of those.

"Every musician I know has got hearing loss," he said.

"When I was in my late 40s, I started to get ringing in the ears as a result of years and years of going to see bands and being a part-time musician."

"What hearing loss does, particularly in a group situation, you tend to say no to a lot of social things because it's really hard work — you miss stuff. In the end, it was like I couldn't be bothered.

"In itself it's bad — your brain requires stimulation from your ears. Being more isolated makes the problem worse. There was definitely a social price to pay."

Mr Sommerville said his experience adapting to hearing technology was positive and he encouraged others experiencing symptoms to do the same.

"I would say anybody, particularly with the current generation of headphone lovers, by the time they are 30 they should visit an audiologist. It's no big deal, it's actually really interesting," he said.

"The old embarrassed guy wearing a hearing aid, those days are over."

Dr Timmer said in the past stigma and outdated beliefs had discouraged many from having an ear check.