

New Hope for Global Solutions to Address Hearing Loss

BY PAIGE STRINGER

Hearing loss is a significant global issue. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) there are about 466 million people, or 5% of the world's population, who have a degree of hearing loss that impacts their daily life and ability to engage with other people. More than 34 million of those affected are children and hearing loss is one of the most common birth anomalies.¹

Unfortunately, there is in general, a low awareness and understanding among governments and society at large about the social and economic impact of untreated hearing loss on the individual, family, and community. This has contributed to a worldwide disparity between preventative treatments and intervention solutions that already exist to address hearing loss and their accessibility to people who would most benefit from them. The WHO indicates that just 44 of the 195 countries of the world feature ear and hearing care in their national health plans, and some of those programs and policies may not be well supported.

For children, hearing loss can have an irreversible and permanent impact on their cognitive, language, and social development if it is not addressed with urgency during their formative years. A child's brain undergoes tremendous growth in the first years of life. Identification of hearing loss as early as possible is essential to enable timely interventions to mitigate its effects. For families who wish for their child with hearing loss to learn to listen and talk, the child must also be provided with hearing technology (hearing aids or cochlear implants) to enable access to the sounds of speech. With the support of professionals in audiology and auditory-verbal practice, families can help their children begin to make sense of sounds they are now hearing through technology and progress through the developmental sequence through which all children evolve to enable listening and spoken language.

Time is of the essence. The later the identification and the start of habilitation, the less time there is to

address the effects of hearing loss on a child's development and the more permanent the impact of hearing loss will be on a child's future. Four elements are equally essential for children with hearing loss to learn to listen and speak: 1) early identification, 2) appropriate hearing technology, 3) access to professionals with expertise in audiology and early intervention, and 4) family engagement. Yet, in many areas of the world, these elements are limited or not available at all.

To help address this, the Global Foundation For Children With Hearing Loss has been working in low resource countries since 2009 to help local partners develop and strengthen in-country services and expertise for young children with hearing loss.

The Global Foundation For Children With Hearing Loss

I was born with a severe-to-profound hearing loss that was identified when I was 11 months old. I was immediately fit with hearing aids and provided with early intervention services in the United States and England. This support during the crucial years of my early development enabled me to learn to listen and talk, attend mainstream schools starting at kindergarten, and grow up to participate fully in our hearing society. I travel a great deal for



Hearing aid training in Vietnam

¹who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/deafness-and-hearing-loss



Audiology training in Vietnam

my work. When I take off my hearing technology before going to bed, I can sleep very well anywhere in the world no matter how close my room is to the elevator. Humor aside, I am grateful for the support I received when I was young. It enabled me to lead a full life and have an opportunity to pay it forward.

I worked for several years in marketing positions at the Clorox Company and Amazon before heading down a path that has been tremendously fulfilling. A visit to Vietnam in 2008 revealed to me gaps in expertise and services across pediatric hearing health care and early intervention. Children were not being screened for hearing loss, new parents were unaware of the implications of pediatric hearing loss, hearing technology was not widely accessible, and early intervention expertise was limited. I realized these gaps were prevalent not just in Vietnam, but in many countries. It did not seem right to me that many children with hearing loss throughout the world would not have an opportunity to reach their full potential simply because of the insufficient support available to them.

To help change this, I established the Global Foundation For Children With Hearing Loss (GFCHL) in 2009. The GFCHL is a nonprofit organization that helps young children with hearing loss living in low- and middle-income countries access the early identification, hearing technology, and locally-based expertise and resources they need to learn to listen and talk.

The GFCHL believes that the most sustainable approach to addressing gaps in pediatric hearing care is to collaborate with government agencies and local health care and educational professionals to establish the expertise and services needed to support their own children with hearing loss.

Instead of following the traditional humanitarian model of bringing in foreign professionals to provide immediate and direct service, our organization takes a

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longer-term view. We work together with our partners to identify opportunity areas and develop programs that strengthen local expertise and services that babies and young children with hearing loss need to thrive. We achieve this through technical support, professional training, parent education, raising public awareness, and research.

Our professional training programs are led by credentialed audiologists and auditory-verbal practitioners. The curriculum is designed with a train-the-trainer approach and is taught to the same group of participants over time. The information is then propagated to others in the country through those trained by the GFCHL, making the effort sustainable. When a collective group of people are provided with knowledge, they are then empowered to strengthen the system of support in their own countries.

GFCHL Training Program in Vietnam

Among other programs that the GFCHL has successfully conducted in Vietnam over the course of 11 years, we have trained about 450 medical and educational professionals across the country in pediatric audiology and auditory-verbal practice. We also provided informational sessions for parents of children with hearing loss learning to listen and talk. As an example of the replicative effect of our training model, one of our graduates instituted an early intervention and audiology center in her province for children with hearing loss learning to listen and talk.



Auditory verbal therapy training in Vietnam



Training nurses in Mongolia to conduct a universal newborn hearing screening test.

This center serves about 70 young children each year in a province that previously did not have such services. The children are prepared for mainstream schools and are supported as long as needed. Additionally, she shares the GFCHL's teachings with other professionals and families.

Expansion of Universal Newborn Hearing Screening in Mongolia

The Mongolia Ministry of Health issued a 2014 decree to implement Universal Newborn Hearing Screening (UNHS). However, there was just one public hospital at the time that had the capability to administer the tests. In September 2016, the GFCHL began a collaboration with the Mongolian medical community to establish universal newborn hearing screening at all public birthing hospitals in the capital of Ulaanbaatar. More than half of the country's annual births, about 38,000 newborns, are born in Ulaanbaatar each year. The GFCHL raised funds to purchase and distribute screening devices to the hospitals and initiated training in their use. We worked closely with the National Center for Maternal and Child Health to establish a network for tracking and to implement processes and procedures for screening and referrals. In each of 2018 and 2019, more than 33,000 babies were screened for hearing loss in Ulaanbaatar in the public hospitals as a direct result of this program and those in need have been referred for intervention. Because screening is the first of four steps toward a child with hearing loss acquiring speech and hearing, the GFCHL also has provided training programs similar as to what has been conducted in Vietnam.

Links

audiology.org/about-us/academy-information/academy-honors/paige-stringer
childrenwithhearingloss.org/



Otoacoustics emissions tests (OAE) can be administered to newborns as early as 24 hours after birth.

Looking Forward with the WHO

Recognizing the growing prevalence of hearing loss worldwide, the World Health Assembly unanimously passed a resolution in 2017 to encourage governments to adopt ear and hearing care policies into their national health plans. In support of member states' efforts to implement this Resolution, the WHO was called upon to prepare the first World Report on Hearing. Due to launch in early 2021, the World Report on Hearing is an evidence-based resource for policymakers. It is intended to inform them about the causes of the condition and the preventative treatments and available interventions to address it across the human life span. The recommendations in the World Report on Hearing could lead to other successful programs and solutions similar to those as achieved by GFCHL in pediatric hearing loss—reasons to be optimistic about the future. **HL**

Paige Stringer, M.A., MPH, is the founder and executive director of the Global Foundation For Children With Hearing Loss (GFCHL). Born with a profound hearing loss, Paige benefited from early intervention services to learn to listen and talk. She established GFCHL in 2009 to help children with hearing loss in low resource countries access the services and expertise they need to thrive. Paige has been involved in work at the World Health Organization since 2015 to help raise awareness for hearing loss globally, including leading the development of the communications strategy for the 2021 release of the WHO World Report on Hearing. Paige has been honored with several awards including the 2019 World of Children Award, 2018 A.G. Bell Award for International Service and the 2014 Humanitarian Award by the American Academy of Audiology. Paige holds a Masters of Arts degree from the University of San Francisco and a Masters of Public Health, Global Health degree from the University of Washington.

