

# Motivating Employees to Wear Hearing Protection Devices

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The preceding EARLog, #6<sup>1</sup>, presented evidence suggesting that reduced employee noise exposures could have tangible health and safety benefits in addition to protecting employee hearing. Although this could provide an incentive for stronger management support of hearing conservation programs (HCPs), other approaches are necessary to motivate employees to conscientiously utilize hearing protection devices (HPDs). A review of the Literature<sup>2-10</sup> suggests that the pivotal characteristics of a successful HCP are:

- support of management
- enforcement
- education
- motivation
- comfortable and effective HPDs

Support by all levels of management is crucial since it sets the tone for the entire program. It demonstrates to employees that hearing conservation is important to their company and to their jobs. Hearing conservation should be viewed as an important and integral part of the overall safety program. Furthermore, management must be responsive to employee problems and complaints so that they can be sincerely and effectively answered.

The next three elements of an HCP are inextricably related. Education and motivation modify employees' behavior, and enforcement provides a constant reminder about that which is deemed acceptable. Enforcement alone can engender resentment and attempts to circumvent HCP requirements, as for example, modifying HPDs for greater comfort and less protection.

Enforcement must be firm and consistent. A four step disciplinary procedure for failure to wear HPDs might consist

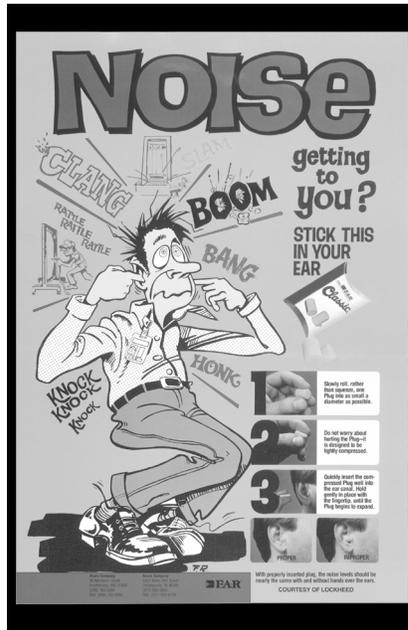


FIGURE 1

of (1) verbal warning, (2) written warning, (3) brief suspension, no pay, and (4) termination. Although the latter steps are necessarily a form of discipline, the verbal warning can and should be handled in a positive manner. Front line supervisors should also be held responsible for the performance of their employees and must set a good example by regularly wearing their HPDs when in posted areas. In fact, all personnel in hearing protection posted areas should wear HPDs, be they visitors, managers, or temporary employees.

Education should consist of topics pertaining to the function of the ear, how it is damaged by noise, and training on use of HPDs. Many short films<sup>11</sup>, are available which are useful to highlight these topics and maintain employee in-

terest. Posters<sup>12</sup> are also useful as reminders and training aids. These are generally available from HPD manufacturers. An example appears in Figure 1.

Unfortunately, education alone is of little value unless it is integrated into the employees' daily experiences. This can be accomplished by making their education personally relevant, either by demonstrating how noise directly affects them or by inducing them to use hearing protection for a long enough time to become adapted, and to appreciate its benefits.

## Motivational Techniques

The best motivational resource is the person or persons in the HCP who are responsible for direct employee contact, those who fit HPDs and administer monitoring audiograms. The annual or biannual audiometric examination provides an excellent opportunity for this person to reinforce good HPD utilization habits. The employees should bring, or preferably wear, their hearing protectors to the test where they can be examined for fit, cleanliness, and signs of deterioration or abuse. After the audiogram is administered, it should be shown to the individual and the results explained. If, for example, the hearing levels are normal and unchanged from previous tests, and the HPDs are in good condition, the individual should be complimented. On the other hand, significant hearing level shifts, should they occur, can be pointed out. This provides an ideal opportunity for reinstruction of HPD fitting procedures and a reminder of the importance of their use. Worn out or abused HPDs should also be replaced at this time (and generally more often).

A very successful behavioral modification approach utilizing employee audiograms has been discussed by Zohar, et

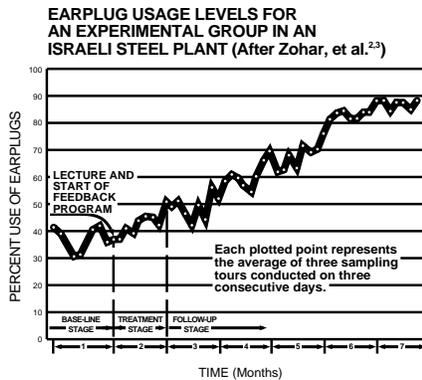


Figure 2

al.<sup>2,3</sup> Workers underwent audiometric testing at 500, 2000, 4000, and 6000 Hz. Testing occurred on randomly selected dates, at the beginning and end of regular shifts. Results were discussed with the employees immediately after the second test, with significant shifts being explained as representing a temporary noise-induced hearing loss. Employees participated in these tests on two separate days, wearing hearing protection one day and none on the other. Audiometric results were also posted on the department bulletin board. This information feedback procedure demonstrated to the employees the effects of noise on their hearing. The feedback lasted only one month, but successfully modified employee behavior and continued working after cessation of the treatments as shown in Figure 2. A control group at the same plant, which received only educational sessions without feedback, showed no change in their HPD utilization rate.

The authors stressed the fact that feedback was maintained for only a limited period of time. The improved performance of the experimental group was attributed to a permanent modification of the work environment, so that HPD usage emerged as a behavior that was continually reinforced by peer pressure and supervisor expectations. It became "respectable" to wear HPDs, whereas previously it was not. The program be-

came a self-sustaining activity.

An alternative method of clearly relating an employee's hearing loss to his own personal noise exposures<sup>6,13</sup> is to ask him to set the volume on his car radio to a *just audible level* upon arriving at work. He should then turn off the ignition, leaving the volume untouched. After returning to his car for the trip home, he should carefully listen to see if he can still hear the radio. If he cannot, this is evidence that his ears have been fatigued by the day's noise exposure. Another motivational approach that has worked for Zohar<sup>3</sup> and others<sup>8</sup> is to reward HPD usage by distributing tokens or lottery tickets to those who correctly wear the devices.

A final motivational tip is to use good public relations and promotion to sell the program, as for example, offering free audiometric testing to the immediate families of employees.<sup>14</sup> Discovering hearing impairment in an employee's child, an impairment that could cause early and difficult to detect learning disabilities, is a good deed that strongly emphasizes the importance of preserving one's hearing.

#### Comfortable and Effective HPDs

Finally, we must consider that all efforts will come to naught unless comfortable and effective HPDs are available for distribution. Articles are available<sup>1</sup> that provide information useful in the determination of the assets and liabilities of various devices. Not all devices are wearable or provide adequate protection. Therefore the HCP coordinator must research the available products and preselect the best. More than one HPD, preferably at least an earmuff and two types of earplugs should be available so that employees can choose a device that appeals to them. Providing workers with this input increases their involvement with the program and enhances the likelihood of achieving their willing participation.

#### CONCLUSION

Hearing conservation is a concept that is viable, but to work it must be vigorously

supported by management, and couched in a holistic framework that includes enforcement, education, motivation, and the availability of comfortable, effective HPDs.

#### References and Footnotes

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- Aearo Company has available five films on hearing and hearing protection. Also available, upon request, is an annotated movie list of approximately 70 films produced by both manufacturers and professional organizations in the U.S and abroad.
- Many manufacturers and organizations have posters available. The one depicted in Figure 1 is available upon request from Aearo Company.
- Cohen, A. (1981). Personal Communication.
- Royster, L.H. (1980). Personal Communication. These should be screening and not diagnostic audiograms. They are only for purposes of referral to a qualified physician.