

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

**Title:** SOUND EDUCATION – GETTING THE RIGHT MESSAGE TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN OCCUPATIONAL NOISE

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### Sound Education – getting the right message to the right people in occupational noise.

Recent data<sup>[1]</sup> show little reduction in occupational noise exposures in the WA mining industry over the past two decades. It is highly likely that this scenario is replicated across other industry sectors and in other regions.

The introduction of AS/NZS 1269 'Occupational noise management' in 1998 heralded a major shift in the approach to noise exposure, away from reliance on personal hearing protection and towards much broader proactive noise management. However, the benefits of this shift are yet to be seen in consistently reduced exposure levels in workplaces. So why are we still seeing no apparent improvements after 20 years?

Occupational Noise Induced Hearing Loss (ONIHL) is the most prevalent industrial disease in Australia, with an estimated 1 million people affected<sup>[2]</sup>. While noise is familiar to all of us on a day-to-day basis, assessment of it is often considered arcane – the realm of experts, beyond the understanding of the majority, including the decision-makers in many cases.

Furthermore, the hazard itself is often treated differently to other workplace hazards. Noise does not hurt (in most cases); it cannot be seen, touched or smelt. It does not cause apparent injury. The resulting hearing loss is not fatal, nor does it manifest itself in most cases until many years after first exposure. Thus for many organisations, noise is close to the bottom of the hazard priority list.

To achieve meaningful exposure reduction, all levels of the company hierarchy need to understand the implications of noise at both a personal and organizational level. The difficulty is pitching the information appropriately for different target groups. Noise assessors/Noise Officers (typically Occupational Hygienists or acoustical consultants) are those tasked with hazard and risk assessment but they must also be able to overcome barriers – technical, financial, practical or cultural - in passing on the relevant information to those best placed to make a difference: the decision-makers, the company directors, the Registered Managers, the PCBUs.

Individual workers too have a duty of care to themselves and to their colleagues to minimize risk and work safely, so they too need an understanding of noise and its risks in order to carry out their activities as safely as possible.

A key requirement of the noise assessor therefore is to de-mystify workplace noise and, with the support of workplace OHS regulators, highlight the importance of action as well as provide information on what that action needs to be. Until there is a clear appreciation of the importance of noise management at all levels of an organization, the status quo is likely to remain.

This presentation aims to offer some tools in the fight to simplify noise, raise its profile, and facilitate meaningful reductions in noise exposure.

**References:**

[1] **Safety Regulation System (SRS) database – WA Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety, July 2020.**

[2] **“The Economic Impact and Cost of Hearing Loss in Australia” – Access Economics Pty Ltd, 2006.**

**KEYWORDS:**

**Occupational noise, hazard, risk, hearing loss, management, exposure.**