



*Audiologist Peter Hutson demonstrates the use of the hearing screener.*

## A fair hearing for hearing

By Rajesh Kumar

A simple new hearing screener being made available to GPs free of cost could help signal potential hearing loss in as little as 15 seconds, enabling steps to be taken while treatments were still possible and behaviours not ingrained.

Audiologist Peter Hutson – director of Bay Audiology which is distributing the free screeners to the majority of the country's GPs – said patients could take up to eight years to broach the subject of their hearing loss, making early intervention almost impossible.

He said screening for hearing loss was often difficult for GPs to initiate as it was rarely a patient priority. 'Patients generally focus on acute problems with their doctor and chronic conditions like hearing loss are often a door-handle consultation on the way out of the surgery.'

Developed by an Australian GP, Dr Stuart Enouf, the screener

resembles an ear muff with a small LED indicator. For screening, all the GP needs to do is block one of the patient's ears and put the screener on the other and press a button.

The device emits five tones in succession covering 500Hz to 3000Hz at 25dB which covers the basic speech spectrum. If the patient does not hear any one tone, the GP can refer them for a comprehensive hearing test.

A recent focus group held by Bay Audiology found GPs felt a little embarrassed in initiating on their own hearing screening, often involving clicking of fingers or whispering.

'And they were unsure of what could be done to address the problem once they detected it. We intend to give up-to-date information on what can be done,' Hutson said.

He added that strong evidence suggested people suffering from hearing loss reduced their social interaction for fear of embarrass-

ment and often slipped into depression. Other patients turned to aggressively dominating conversations.

'It is important to intervene as early as possible to improve patients' quality of life. Otherwise, over the years the behaviour can become ingrained without anyone realising that the underlying reason was gradual loss of hearing.'

Bay Audiology is hoping the free screeners would encourage GPs to incorporate routine screening for hearing loss in their practice, indirectly helping them get patient referrals. 'But business is not the only motivation,' Hutson said. 'GPs are free to refer patients to their usual providers. The idea is to make GPs aware of the facilities available and encourage early detection of hearing problems and the facilities that are available to halt or reverse the process of decline.'

The Bay Audiology is scheduling regular workshops called 'Ear Essentials' to create awareness on the problem and the available solutions.

### Simplicity an advantage

Dr Bill Baber, senior ENT surgeon at North Shore hospital, told GP hearing loss was still not well understood and tolerated in the community, 'and I would encourage any improvement in diagnosis and recognition of the condition'.

He thought the screener was a 'pretty useful device' for situations where a full hearing test was not indicated initially. 'It has the advantages of simplicity with ease of use, and doesn't need regular calibration as do standard audiometers. It should indicate where there is a hearing problem and reassure when there isn't.'

### Embarrassment

Hearing loss is often ignored by patients who consider it an embarrassing sign of ageing. It is the third most common chronic condition in older people after hypertension and arthritis and more men than women seem to be affected by it. Several high-risk patient groups who should be regularly screened include diabetics and those working in noisy environments.

Interested GPs who have not received a free screener can contact their nearest Bay Audiology to have one sent to them.