

BRITISH ACOUSTICAL SOCIETY

70/32

OCCUPATIONAL HEARING LOSS
23-25 March 1970

THE ADMINISTRATION OF A HEARING CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

by

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The requirements of a hearing conservation programme have been stated as being:-

- i) Noise level measurement
- ii) The provision of hearing protection
- iii) Audiometric monitoring

Those working in the field of hearing conservation and acoustics may feel that meeting these requirements in an industrial situation should not give rise to undue difficulty. In my view, this is not the case. The industrial medical officer who has to provide and administer a hearing conservation programme for his company will face a variety of problems of varying magnitude. At the present time there is increasing pressure on industrial medical officers to introduce hearing conservation programmes, and this may well be a suitable opportunity to enumerate some of the difficulties of running such a programme. Those who work in this specialist area should understand that these problems exist and be ready to give appropriate guidance if the prevention of noise induced hearing loss by means of hearing conservation programmes in industry is not to founder or fall into disrepute.

i) Taking the requirements of a hearing conservation programme in order, the first area in which problems arise is that of noise level measurement. The purchase of suitable equipment and the techniques of conducting noise level measurement surveys have many pitfalls. In many cases it may be better for a company to arrange for this work to be done on a contract basis by an organisation familiar with this type of work. The cost of such surveys is often considerable and their validity in short and long term is often questionable. Acting on the results of these surveys will produce many problems.

ii) Advice will be required on noise suppression of equipment and areas in which hearing protection ought to be provided. A reasonable degree of expertise is required if the advice given is to be of real value. As far as the provision of hearing protection is concerned, this is an area in which most industrial medical officers are capable of giving sound advice, although evaluating the claims of various manufacturers of the effectiveness and suitability of their equipment may be rather difficult. It is possible, without care and knowledge, to purchase equipment which is needlessly expensive or fails to meet the requirements of the job.

iii) The provision of pre-employment and periodic audiometric re-checks creates many difficulties for the industrial medical officer and his company.

- a) The capital cost of equipment is considerable, as are the running costs.
- b) The provision and training of suitable staff is not easy.
- c) Maintenance of useful audiometric records is an important administrative requirement, particularly where large numbers of staff have to be tested. Arranging audiometric testing after a period free from noise exposure is an almost insuperable problem and if it is believed that this is an essential requirement then routine audiometry in an industrial organisation is virtually impossible.
- d) The administrative difficulties of organising mass audiometric checks are considerable and, if such surveys are not properly organized, extremely expensive.
- e) Statistical handling of data may be desirable in organisations with a large noise exposed population and poses further problems if valid and usable results are to be obtained.

If industry in this country is to be asked to provide hearing conservation programmes for the prevention of noise induced hearing loss, the extent of such programmes should be carefully considered and every effort made to resolve the difficulties mentioned above.