

Men's Health

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PM John Howard

PM speaks up as others suffer in silence

By Margo

While half the men in Australia who have some hearing loss, won't acknowledge it, or do anything about it, Prime Minister John Howard talks about his hearing impairment frankly and without awkwardness.

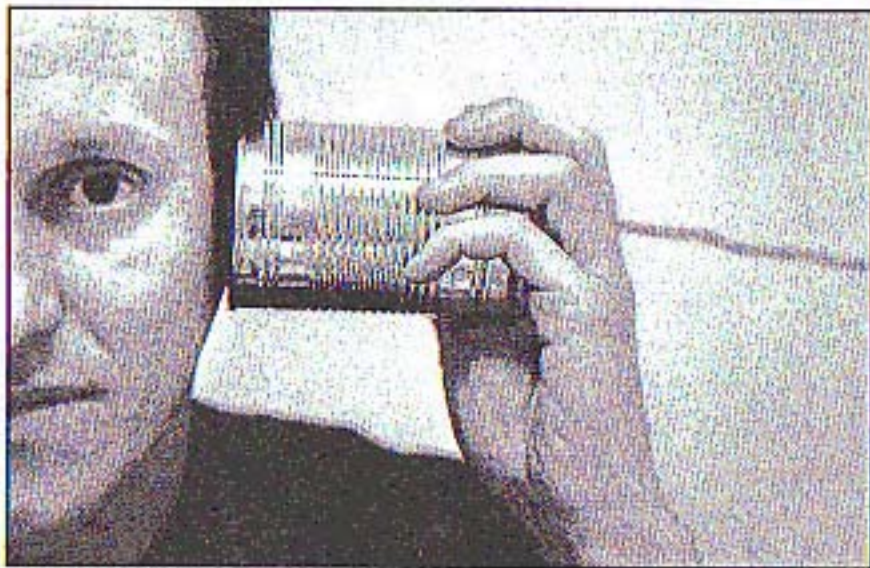
"I've got about 80 per cent in the left ear and about 50 per cent in the right ear and I wear a tiny digital hearing aid which is barely noticeable, unless you know it is there," he told *The Australian Financial Review* this week. "I'm still below par, but because of the hearing aid, I can get by fairly well.

"I made it very clear when I became opposition leader again in 1995 that I did have a bit of a hearing problem because it is important that people should know. I'm not expecting any sympathy, it is just that they should know for their own convenience."

Unlike Howard, there are thousands of middle-aged Australian men whose lives are a daily struggle because of a hearing loss they won't recognise.

The first large population study to look at hearing loss in Australia has found that over the age of 55, about 44 per cent of men have some loss. Much of it is mild or moderate but its incidence doubles with each decade men age.

The study, which was conducted on 2,000 people in the Blue Mountains of NSW, showed that less than half of the men with measured hearing loss had sought help. Less than a third used a hearing aid. Many had been given a hearing aid, but stopped wearing it because it fitted poorly, was not working well, was an old model or they believed it stigmatised them.



Deafening silence... half the men in Australia who have some hearing loss, won't acknowledge it.

PHOTO: GUY LAWRENCE

Howard, who first began wearing a hearing aid in his teens, thinks the signs had more or less gone: "It was probably there when I was younger, but people are far more sensible about these things now."

His hearing problem was first identified during a routine check up at the Government school he attended in Sydney in the '40s. "By the time I was in my late teens, I was very deaf and I wore one of the more cumbersome hearing aids which had cards and a little unit in my pocket."

Howard had the condition know as otosclerosis where excess bone

growth interferes with the action of the three little bones of the middle ear. By the time he was 20, he had his first operation to relieve the condition and has since had two more.

The impairment has had some bearing on his life. "At university I found the lectures very difficult and I think one of the reasons I didn't go to the bar was because I was a bit conscious I might not pick up everything in court hearings and cross-examination. I certainly have to concentrate very hard at meetings and occasionally at press conferences if I don't hear something, I'll

ask the person to repeat it. I find cocktail parties difficult which is why I was never foreign minister!"

Although there have been two population studies into hearing in Australia, this latest one is the largest and has the biggest component of older people. It is part of the Blue Mountains Eye Study which has been underway for almost a decade.

Associate professor Paul Mitchell from Sydney University who headed the study and associate professor Philip Newall from Macquarie University who supervised the hearing testing team, found that loss

was more common in men. Over the age of 55, only 35 per cent of women suffered loss. They defined hearing loss as a loss greater than 25 decibels in both ears.

Apart from age, the study showed the likelihood of deafness is increased by diabetes, a history of noise exposure and smoking. Alcohol can be good or bad. While moderate drinking appears protective, heavy drinking seems to exacerbate the loss.

It is very common for people to deny hearing loss, says Dr Robert Payton, of the Australian Society of Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery.

"Typically, a wife who accompanies her husband to my rooms will say 'Doctor, he doesn't hear very well.' The man will respond with 'Oh no, I hear very well, it is just that everyone mumbles.'"

Payton says hearing loss is insidious. Like weight gain, it creeps up. When it dawns on men that it has happened, they realise they're not hearing at meetings, they're losing confidence because people think they're slow on the uptake and they are finding it increasingly difficult to build new social relationships.

As noise is such a big factor in male deafness, Payton recommends noise protection and a loud bang, loud exposure to it. At present little can be done for age-related loss but there are new hopes for the future.

According to a review on hearing impairment published in the *British Medical Journal*, there is now an appreciation that loss may not be inevitable with age and that in 10 to 20 years, gene therapy or drug treatments may be able to halt or even reverse its progression.