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Remember Hearing Loss

I know very little about design of any kind. I'm not particularly artistic or talented when it comes to painting, architecture, clothing or anything else that might be deemed to involve "design". So even I, am wondering what I'm doing here, speaking at a conference about universal design.

Indeed when asked if I would present a paper at this conference I am somewhat embarrassed to admit that I had little idea of what Universal Design was about.

My partner, who is an Occupational Therapist, but also has qualifications in architectural drafting, gave me her take on Universal Design. This had me believing that it was all about designing buildings for wheelchair access. Perhaps I exaggerate the simplicity of her explanation, but through the wonders of Google, I found that Universal Design is about inclusive access for all regardless of ability or disability, language, height or any other facet of our being. And it's not just about buildings. It's also about devices, environments, systems and processes which are able to be used by, and useful to, the widest range of people regardless of their circumstances.

I then decided to see what others had written specifically about Hearing loss and Universal Design. I could only find two articles. These turned out to be the same paper presented under a different title by the same author....Who was also complaining that there was very little written about Universal Design and Hearing Loss.

So it seems that hearing loss can be forgotten. I want everyone to Remember Hearing Loss.

I may not know much about design but I do understand hearing problems.

Hearing loss is one of the invisible disabilities, yet one in six Australians has a hearing loss, making it one of the most common problems that we face. As we get older those statistics rise. By the time you are 60 there's a 50% chance that you will be suffering some form of hearing impairment.

It's not my intention to stand here today and talk about specific solutions, devices, technology and design. This is not going to be an academic paper. Instead I want to talk about the reasons why it is important to always remember hearing loss. Whenever you're involved with planning, designing, constructing. Whether it's buildings, environments, systems or devices I want you to remember hearing loss.

Hearing loss isolates people. It causes frustration, embarrassment, loneliness. It causes family disagreements and even anger. Hearing Loss changes lives; A fact that many fail to recognise or understand unless they have first-hand experience.

It's amazing how reluctant people are to admit to having a hearing loss. This means they are also reluctant ask for help. Wouldn't it be good if the help was already "built in" as part of the system.

Research tells us that Hearing loss is associated with cognitive problems, falls and depression. Recent research is suggesting that the cognitive load placed on people who are struggling to hear distracts them enough to increase the risk of falling even with a relatively mild hearing loss. The risk of falling increases as the hearing loss gets worse. So having a hearing loss, particularly an unattended hearing loss has broad ramifications in health, safety and life style.

Another interesting statistic;

The average person waits six to ten years from the time the hearing problems are noticed to the time they actually do something. Even then about half only do so because they are strongly encouraged to do something by a relative or significant other.

The "doing something" frequently means getting hearing aids. This may seem like the panacea, the solution to all the problems. But we must remember we have not corrected the hearing loss. Hearing aids are not new ears. Therefore we need to foster environments that make it easier for people to hear, and easier for people to use hearing aids and other devices.

So let's have a look at some of the situations where it's important to remember hearing loss.

In the home simple things like not hearing the door bell or the phone ring may be brushed off as inconsequential but what about the smoke alarm? Smoke alarm sounds a lot more serious doesn't it? Smoke alarms are available that will connect to flashing lights or vibrating pads. How much easier it would be if this was standardised.

Likewise, not just at home but, in Hotel accommodation.

I was recently told of a profoundly deaf man who informed the hotel where he was staying that he was unable to hear fire and smoke alarms in the night due to not having his cochlear implants turned on at night. The next morning, after a good nights sleep, he got up to find a note pushed under his door. It said, "the fire alarm is going off". We don't just need Universal Design, we also need awareness training.

Whilst on the topic of hotels and travel. Imagine you're at an airport or train station. An announcement comes over the PA system. We all find it difficult to understand some of these types of announcements (even with good hearing). Imagine how much harder this is for people with hearing problems. But wouldn't we all appreciate better systems of getting the message across.

I've got to the age where I am travelling more. Crossing places off my bucket list! I'm doing the type of travel that would have horrified me 40 years ago. I have met so many people who are my age group and older who are missing out on information from tour guides because they can't hear well and there are no systems in place to help. And, sadly, very few people even think about accommodating hearing loss. For many people the travel experience is about learning about new places and cultures, and it's about meeting new people.

When you have a hearing loss all this becomes so much more difficult. So on coaches, on cruise ships, in hotels, museums and other tourist attractions, we need to remember hearing loss.

Shopping centres are crowded, noisy and they echo. Shops play loud music. Even if you have good hearing they're not conducive to good communication. Again, Image what it's like when your hearing is impaired. Likewise, in restaurants and cafes, all the bare hard surfaces bounce the sound around making it difficult, if not impossible, for us to comfortably hold a conversation. We know it **is** possible to improve the acoustics but maybe it changes the look or feel of the place.

Unfortunately there are times when, what might be described as the "ambience" seems to take precedence over access.

In 2010, there was a Senate inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia. The Committee heard evidence that there is a lack of hearing access in public buildings and spaces.

Organisations and individuals complained of problems in a range of situations.

One woman said "My greatest frustration is lack of hearing access to public buildings, transport, entertainment and education."

Another woman found herself in a somewhat ironic situation when she attempted to work for improved access.

She said, "Technology such as audio loops and captioning was slow to be introduced. This was an unfair situation so I decided to join the disability access committee at my local council" and, you probably guessed it, Not only did the room have no audio loop but it did not even have a PA system so it was impossible for her to participate in the meeting.

Evidence was also provided to the committee that many of Australia's theme parks and other iconic tourist attractions are inaccessible to people with hearing impairment.

Although there was some evidence to suggest that audio loops and other systems were becoming more common, particularly in cinemas, public halls and churches, it was often found that they were not activated and that there seemed to be a lack of knowledge about how to use them.

In retirement villages and aged care facilities (the very places where we are bound to find a high percentage of people with hearing problems) there seems to be a lack of assistive devices. Dining rooms and other communal areas often have poor acoustics.

The Senate committee were told that although building codes include requirements for hearing augmentation systems, when it comes to final certification a lot of them get forgotten or get ticked off without being checked properly because the people who are certifying the buildings don't know how to test the system.

Even ex Prime Minister John Howard has not been immune to the problems of access for hearing impaired. At a Better Hearing Australia conference last year, Mr Howard told delegates that, Although the new Parliament House had a Hearing loop installed in the chambers, when he became PM he had to arrange for a system for the cabinet room.

At Better Hearing we get calls for help from people who have to go to court and are not able to manage because of the lack of access for Deaf and Hearing impaired. In the case of a deaf person who uses Auslan (Australian sign language) as their main means of communication, an interpreter is usually arranged, but for people with an acquired hearing loss who must still rely on managing to hear as best possible, their situations are often forgotten, and cause a great deal of stress.

Only last week I spoke to a man who had been a juror and managed well in court with his hearing aids. The judge was particular about everyone speaking into the microphone and being clear. However, the jury room was a disaster. He explained that the acoustic in this room were atrocious and he had a great deal of trouble.

Hospitals can also pose problems. From not hearing your name called at the out patients clinic, to misunderstanding the doctor prior to surgery.

In all these situations, it's not that help is unavailable, but when the hearing augmentation system has not been considered as a standard part of the building or process, it is often convoluted and difficult to organise, making it stressful for all concerned. It would be great if everyone remembered hearing loss.

As the retirement age for Australians increases, and bearing in mind the prevalence of hearing loss in the over sixties age group, It will be even more necessary for workplaces to consider barriers free designs.

Though, on its own, a mild hearing loss might be considered a minor issue, the possibility of combined problems (for example poorer eyesight and hearing loss) will make barriers more significant.

We think of Universal Design as being "Barrier Free".

Unfortunately the invisible nature of hearing loss also tends to render the barriers invisible too. We simply don't think about them.

This is not to say that there aren't some very good examples of great access for people with hearing loss.

Both the Sydney Opera House and the Arts Centre Melbourne, have captioning, induction loops, FM systems, and even Auslan interpreters at some performances. Patrons DO use these systems.

But I also know that people with hearing loss DO AVOID difficult listening situation. This is not good for them, and it's not good for the business either.

By pure chance, communication has been enhanced for many Deaf and hearing impaired people, And with no real effort or thought of hearing loss. Text messages and email have been embraced by many who previously found phone use too difficult.

If we can make life easier in this way, without even about hearing loss, imagine what we can achieve when we DO remember hearing loss.