Hearing Impairments in the Society of Developing Country, Indonesian Case

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Hearing impairment as an invisible disability is interesting for the sufferer, the surrounding society as well as the medical profession. It is called invisible because the sufferer may look like a normal person by compensating the disability with other senses, such as the vision, etc. Unlike the blinds who are totally disabled, the hearing impaired are likely to do their daily activities, unless the kind of the job demands perfect hearing, such as a teacher or a telephone operator, etc. Therefore the fate of a hearing impaired depends on the degree of deafness and the surrounding society. The author would like to review the fate of the hearing impaired in Indonesia, one of the developing countries.

1. Social Structure

A country may be categorized as developing if it is left behind in applying the modern life conveniences and if the majority of people have low income. Though potentially rich in natural resources, Indonesia has not yet been capable in organizing a modern government to achieve better economic conditions to provide welfare for the majority of the people.

The majority of people of Indonesia are traditional farmers, fishermen, laborers or small retailers, living in the villages or in rural area and earning low income. About one third of the population belongs to the middle income; they are teachers, government employees or traditional traders. High-income people comprise the minority and usually live in big cities. The latter have social characteristics similar to modern societies.
2. Social Tradition and Health Services

One of the traditions that affect the life of a hearing impaired in the society may be the acceptance of extended family system. In one house there may be living not only father, mother and children, but also grandfather, grandmother, uncles, aunts, nephews, etc. They live in a communal life. This crowded situation maybe advantageous to the hearing impaired, because of voluntary assistance given by other members in the family. A medical advice would only be looked for when the deafness has been severe, so that communications is hard to carry out. In such cases the members in the family who earn more will collectively donate money for the disabled for medical expenses including a hearing aid.

Health insurance is not obligated to all people and still unpopular in Indonesia. Only the government employees and some private companies are obligated to be health insurance members, which covers only basic clinical or surgical services. Hearing aids are excluded or only be partially helped.

National Health Referral System has established to serve thousands of districts in the country. Patients from Rural Health Centers could be referred to Regency Hospitals and further be proceeded to Regional Referral Hospital. Only the latter has the facilities to evaluate a hearing impairment, because of connected to a medical education in that region. Here, reconstructive ear surgery is available, but hearing aid is to be purchased outside.

Private practices and private Hospitals are also available in big cities serving people with higher income. Such a hospital in Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia, has carried out the very expensive cochlear implantation, quite recently.

3. Hearing Impairments in the Elderly

Presbyacusis or hearing impairment in the elderly, is apparently increasing in number, due to the increase of life expectancy in Indonesia, from 47 years in the 1950’s to 62 years nowadays. The sufferer may not recognize the loss of hearing, because the onset is insidious and come very slowly. Tete-a-tete conversation is still heard, but distant conversation is often misunderstood. Though the surrounding people have noticed the hearing impairment in an elderly, living in an extended family calls no problem with daily activities, because traditionally, the younger have to look up the elderly. That is why presbyacusis presented in the medical practice has fell into severe deafness, where a hearing aid are no more effective. As presbyacusis belongs to sensorineural or nerve deafness, a loud conversation may cause pain in the ear and consequently refuse to listen. For better understanding, speaking to the elderly should be carried out with slow speed and exaggerated mimic expression, rather than quick repetitive sentences.

For elderly with social activities outdoors, a hearing aid is certainly needed. It is not rare that an elderly with presbyacusis comes to visit ENT private practice showing a hearing aid purchased by some relatives from other town or from overseas, complaining that the device is not matched with him, because of whistling