

Can you say that again?

It's better to ask than to pretend you heard says Paul Cockram

Confession time. You might have said things to me over the years that I didn't really hear. The fact is, I have a problem with my hearing.

In my case it's a combination of an inability to hear high-frequency sounds combined with a dose of tinnitus; the Latin origin means 'tinkling or ringing like a bell'. Perhaps around 18% of Australians suffer from tinnitus to some degree.

Like a lot of people with later-life hearing loss I'm guilty of doing bad things in my youth. As a magazine designer I spent an awful lot of time in printing factories standing next to gigantic web-fed, two-storey-high printing presses that emitted a fearful racket.

'Blam blam blam blam over a thunderous rumbling.' "Can you get rid of that smudge on the side?" "What?" "The smudge just there." "Say again?" "Oh, never mind, it'll probably get trimmed off anyway."

In those days no one wore ear protection in the printing industry. In my case this self-inflicted damage was exacerbated when I chilled after a hard day in the machine room by blasting Pink Floyd's 'Wish You Were Here' into my brain via headphones. It's still a great album but these days it's more like, 'wish I could hear'.

For many years, although I didn't realise it at the time, I was disguising my hearing incompetence with a variety of techniques. Fudging it is not so hard because if you're about to step in front of a moving car the person who alerts you is not going to whisper.

It's the quieter parts of life where the non-listening techniques are first employed. Nodding and becoming adept at following the flowing cadence makes run-of-the-mill anecdotes easy to deal with. A simple, "Oh I know," every so often will usually do the trick.

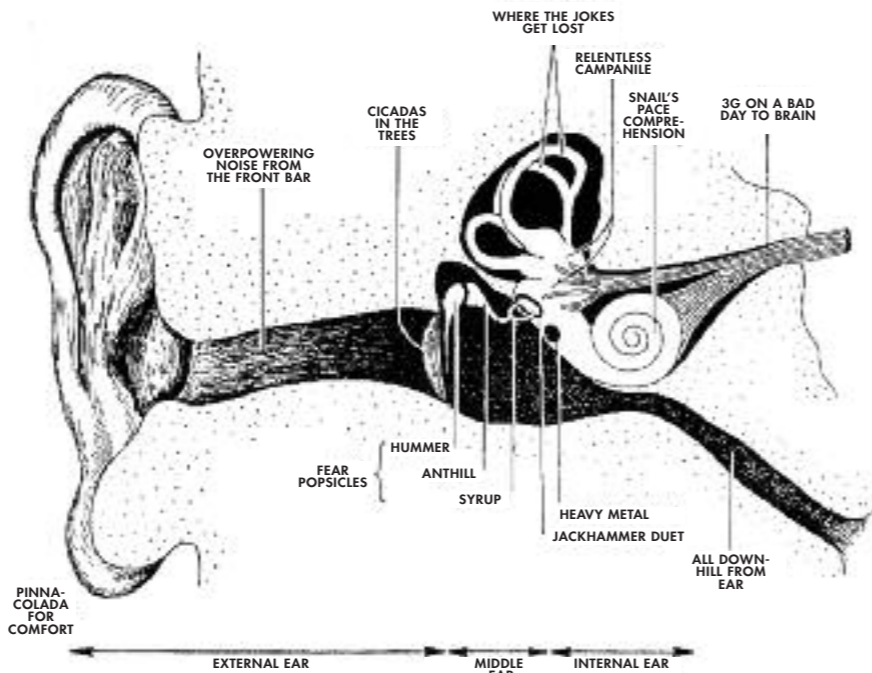


Figure 29.14 Ear of a quizzically-looking person

What a terrible irony it is to develop a reputation as a good listener while not hearing half the words. More fool the talker who can bang on for ages without noticing I suppose.

It was in 2008 when I was elected to Palerang Council that I first discovered I couldn't cope with situations where I really needed to hear everything being said. A hearing test clearly showed my high-frequency sounds deficiency and I was fitted with a [bloody expensive] hearing aid.

One great social disadvantage of poor hearing is the inability to follow the normal prompts of everyday conversation — to hear the little gaps when it could be your turn to speak. Highly excitable occasions like dinner parties with high background noise and everyone going at a million miles an hour are especially difficult.

In my case I've noticed a slight lag between words said and their meaning registering in my brain. So the faster the words flow the harder it is to keep up with the conversation.

Quips are difficult to catch and so is following the witty rapid-fire repartee that is sure to follow if the dinner party is sufficiently well lubricated. It's a real piss-off to miss out on a joke that everyone else is cracking up over.

For people who don't hear effortlessly, reading is a real joy. SBS is my television station of choice; the dialogue in any language is like gentle music and I've become so adept at reading subtitles I don't notice them any more.

So reading a council business paper is no big deal. There's no: "Oh just get on

with it will you," like there is with listening. Hard of hearing people are especially disadvantaged and dismayed by waffle-speak.

Reading, for deaf(ish) people, is hearing everything perfectly for once. If you get bored by written, hearing-in-your-head waffle, skip ahead; if you need it repeated, simply read it again.

After reading the business paper and writing notes, council meetings too were more enjoyable and easier than, say, your average dinner party. The Chair gives you the call, you take a breath, compose your thoughts and off you go. No one speaks or interrupts until your time is up.

While I've been on council we've introduced microphone etiquette for most meetings which I think has been of benefit to us all; councillors, staff and the public gallery. It's an area where Palerang is more advanced than Queanbeyan. While I'm still around I'll do my best to have all meetings in the new QPRC audible and therefore accessible for everyone.

If you know someone who seems a bit slow or looks at you quizzically, it's very likely they're not hearing you properly. Be kind to them. The hard-of-hearing get on best with people who speak slowly, distinctly and sparingly.

If you are a hard-of-hearing person, get tested and learn your options. Admit to yourself and to others that you have a disability and then people who care for you will act considerately. So there you go. There's my personal and political confession — but maybe I haven't heard the last of you yet.

The Allergy season is here!

It is that time of the year where you may suddenly start to sneeze, the nose runs or is blocked and the eyes can get itchy and runny. It is spring and the pollen season has started and so has your seasonal allergy. These are all common symptoms of hay fever. Some people can also get headache and have symptoms that is so severe that they can't sleep or concentrate and in general feel unwell and tired.

What really happens is that your immune system, which normally attacks viruses and bacteria that you do not want in your body, mistake the pollen you breathe in for an intruder and launches an attack. This result is your nasal passages become inflamed and produce more mucus. Hence the swelling leading to blocked nose and the increased runny nose. It can also lead to itchy and watery eyes.

Things you can do to reduce exposure to pollen:

- Check pollen calendar on websites like allergy.org.au or get a phone app like "Canberra pollen count and forecast". Or know when to listen for the daily forecast on television or radio.
- Stay indoors as much as possible: especially after midday in spring when the pollen count forecast is high, and on windy days or after thunderstorms.
- Shower after outdoor activities to wash off pollen.
- Wash your eyes often with lubricating eye drops or saline water to flush out any pollen.
- Flush your nasal passages with a nasal rinse like "NeilMed Sinus Rinse" or "Flo Sinus Care" to mechanically remove pollen from the nasal cavities.

Many treatments are available to buy in the pharmacy today, things that rapidly relieve symptoms and preventative treatments to control symptoms. As with all things in health remember that it is the preventative treatment that is most important as it stops the symptoms from happening in the first place.

Some commonly used types of medication are:

- **Intranasal corticosteroid sprays** — these nasal sprays contain very low-dose steroids and are one of the most effective treatments for allergic rhinitis. They need to be used regularly to be effective. Please ask for a demonstration in the pharmacy on how to use them correctly to get the best effect.
- **Non-sedating antihistamine medications** — these may be useful to control sneezing and itching, but are not as effective as intranasal corticosteroid sprays to control a severely blocked or runny nose.
- **Eye drops** — may relieve itchy, swollen or runny eyes. Please ask for a demonstration in the pharmacy on how to instil your eye drops correctly.

Please discuss with your local community pharmacist or doctor which combination or products will be best for you.

If you are pregnant or breastfeeding please ask your pharmacist for advice on what products would be best for you and are safe to use for your baby. The advice will be tailored to your specific situation.

Bente Hart and Julie Ballard
Braidwood Pharmacy

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Our community matters

Julie Ballard & Bente Hart

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