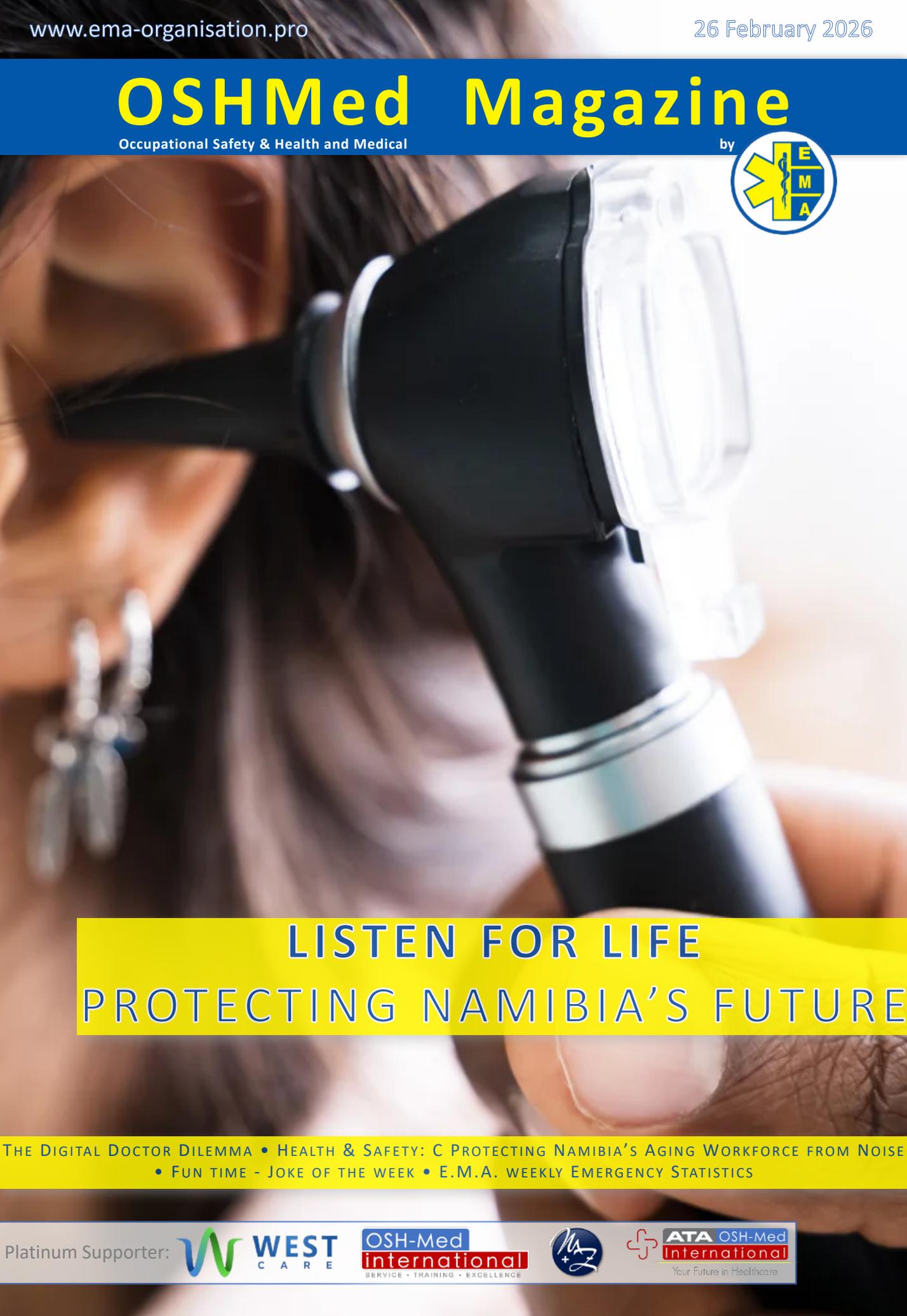


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Occupational Safety & Health and Medical

by



LISTEN FOR LIFE PROTECTING NAMIBIA'S FUTURE

THE DIGITAL DOCTOR DILEMMA • HEALTH & SAFETY: C PROTECTING NAMIBIA'S AGING WORKFORCE FROM NOISE
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Listen for Life: Protecting Namibia's Future

Windhoek – On 3 March, Namibia joins the global community to observe **World Hearing Day**. In a world that is getting louder by the decade, this day serves as a critical reminder that our hearing is a precious, finite resource. From the bustling open markets of Oshakati to the vibrant nightlife of Windhoek, the sounds of our nation define us—but only if we protect our ability to hear them.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) warns that by 2050, nearly 2.5 billion people will live with some degree of hearing loss. In Namibia, where access to specialised audiology services can be a

challenge in rural areas, **prevention** is not just a suggestion; it is a necessity.

The Silent Threat: Loud Music and Modern Habits

One of the greatest risks to the younger generation of Namibians is **Recreational Noise-Induced Hearing Loss**. The rise of high-quality smartphones and noise-canceling earbuds has created a "silent epidemic."

- **The 60/60 Rule:** Experts suggest listening to music at no more than **60% volume** for no more than **60 minutes** a day.
- **The Club Scene:** Many entertainment venues in Namibia operate at decibel levels that can cause permanent damage in under 15 minutes.
- **Warning Signs:** If your ears ring



From communities to schools: hearing care for all children

Act now so no child is left behind due to ear or hearing problems



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- (tinnitus) or sounds seem muffled after a night out or a long commute with headphones, you have already sustained minor nerve damage.

The Hidden Consequences of Silence

Hearing loss is often dismissed as a minor inconvenience of aging, but the reality is far more severe. When we lose the ability to communicate effectively, the "invisible disability" takes a heavy toll:

- **Social Isolation:** Difficulty following conversations leads many to withdraw from family gatherings and community events, often resulting in depression.
- **Economic Impact:** For our workforce, untreated hearing loss can lead to lower productivity and higher unemployment rates.
- **Cognitive Decline:** Modern research shows a direct link between untreated hearing loss and an increased risk of dementia, as the brain struggles to process fragmented sound signals.

Preventive Measures: A Call to Action

The good news? Most causes of hearing loss are **preventable**. This World Hearing Day, the Ministry of Health and social welfare advocates for a proactive approach:

1. **Lower the Volume:** Use earplugs in noisy environments (including construction sites and loud church services).
2. **Get Tested:** Annual hearing screenings should be as routine as

eye exams, especially for school-aged children.

3. **Vaccinate:** Ensure children are vaccinated against rubella and meningitis, both of which are leading causes of childhood deafness.
4. **Avoid "Ear Cleaning":** Never insert cotton swabs or sharp objects into the ear canal. The ear is self-cleaning, and "poking" can rupture the eardrum.

Changing the Narrative

"To hear for life, listen with care." This year's theme reminds us that while technology can help—through hearing aids and cochlear implants—nothing beats the natural hearing we are born with.

As we celebrate our heritage through song, dance, and talk this 3 March, let us commit to turning the volume down so that we can keep the conversation going for years to come.

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The Digital Doctor Dilemma: Why AI Chatbots Often Miss the Mark on Health

WINDHOEK – In an era where a doctor's appointment can involve long wait times and travel, many Namibians are turning to their smartphones for quick medical answers. Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbots like ChatGPT and Gemini have become the "first responders" for symptoms ranging from persistent coughs to skin rashes.



However, a new study published in *Nature Medicine* warns that these digital assistants are far from foolproof. The research suggests that while AI is technically brilliant, it often fails when faced with the messy,

unorganised way humans describe their health.

The "Incomplete Information" Trap

The study found that the accuracy of a chatbot depends heavily on how a person asks a question. Unlike a human doctor, who will ask follow-up questions about your lifestyle or medical history, an AI often takes your words at face value.

"If a patient forgets to mention a key symptom, the AI doesn't always know to ask for it," the report explains. This leads to "incomplete answers" that can result in an incorrect self-diagnosis. In fact, a control group using traditional internet searches was **1.5 times more likely** to reach a correct suspected diagnosis than those relying solely on AI chatbots.

Misunderstanding the Advice

Perhaps more concerning for the Namibian public is how users react to the AI's suggestions. The study revealed that even when the AI provided a correct diagnosis, more than half of the participants still chose the wrong next steps—such as deciding not to visit a clinic when they actually needed professional care.



Dr. Anne Reinhardt, a health communication expert, noted that most people lack "digital health literacy." They often don't know how to critically check the AI's answers or steer the conversation to get the most accurate result.

Vulnerability to Misinformation

Another danger identified is the AI's susceptibility to "medical fake news." Research from the Icahn School of Medicine in New York showed that if a user feeds the AI incorrect information—such as myths found on social media—the AI sometimes fails to debunk it, instead incorporating the falsehood into its response depending on how the question is phrased.

What This Means for Namibia

As Namibia continues to bridge the digital divide, health officials emphasize that technology should support, not replace, professional healthcare.

"Chatbots are not yet mature enough for independent medical use," experts warn. For a chatbot to be safe, it would need to be regulated as a medical product, ensuring it provides scientifically backed information while clearly stating its limitations.

Safe Practices for Namibian Users:

- **Don't skip the clinic:** AI can be a starting point, but it cannot perform physical exams or blood tests.
- **Be specific:** If using AI, provide as much detail as possible about your symptoms, duration, and history.
- **Check the source:** Always verify AI advice with reputable health organisations.

While the future of AI in Namibian medicine is promising, for now, the best prescription remains a visit to a qualified healthcare professional. As the saying goes: your health is your wealth—don't leave it entirely in the hands of an algorithm.

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Health & Safety - Protecting Namibia's Aging Workforce from Noise

WINDHOEK – Namibia's workforce is maturing. In sectors ranging from mining in the Erongo region to manufacturing in Windhoek's northern industrial area, many of our most experienced foremen and technicians are approaching or exceeding the age of 60.

While their experience is invaluable, they face a unique health challenge: age-related hearing loss combined with industrial noise. According to global health data, over 30% of individuals aged 65 and over suffer from hearing impairment. For Namibian companies, this means the traditional "one-size-fits-all" approach to earplugs is no longer enough.

The "Hearing Aid" Misconception

A common and dangerous misconception in Namibian workshops is that if a worker already wears a hearing aid, they don't need

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Earplugs

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03



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04



Double Hearing Protection (DHP)

Combines earplugs and earmuffs for maximum protection (NRR up to 36); recommended for noise levels exceeding 95 dBA.

05



Choosing the Right Protection

Consider your environment, noise levels, and comfort needs to select the best hearing protection for long-term health.



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further protection. Some managers assume that because the worker is already partially deaf, the loud machinery "can't do any more damage."

This is false. Experts warn that hearing aids are **not** protection devices. In fact, a hearing aid that is turned off does not have a certified Noise Reduction Rating (NRR). Without proper protection, loud industrial noise can continue to damage the remaining sensitive nerve cells in the inner ear.

Safety Risks: The Silence of Danger

In a busy Namibian factory, being able to hear is a safety requirement. "If a worker removes their hearing aid to wear standard earplugs, they might not hear a reversing forklift or an emergency siren," says the report by Gregory Boothe.

This creates a "catch-22":

- **Option A:** Wear hearing aids and risk further ear damage from loud noise.
- **Option B:** Wear earplugs and risk a workplace accident because you can't hear your surroundings.

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A Solution for Namibian Industry: Earmuffs over Plugs

So, how should Namibian safety officers handle this? The hierarchy of controls suggests the best move is to relocate hearing-impaired workers to quieter zones. However, in smaller operations, this isn't always possible. The most effective compromise is the use of **high-quality earmuffs** instead of earplugs. Earmuffs can often be worn comfortably over hearing aids.



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This allows the worker to keep their hearing aids on (often at a lower setting) to maintain situational awareness, while the earmuffs provide the certified physical barrier needed to block out harmful decibels.

The Economic Case for Protection

Protecting the hearing of older workers is not just a health issue; it's an economic one. Replacing a technician with 30 years of experience is expensive and difficult in Namibia's specialized labor market.

By updating **Hearing Conservation Programmes** to include specialized equipment for those with diminished

hearing, Namibian companies can retain their best talent longer.

A Call to Employers

This World Hearing Day, the message to Namibian industry is clear: Don't wait for a worker to become completely deaf before acting.

- 1. Conduct regular noise monitoring** in all zones.
- 2. Audit your PPE:** Ensure you have earmuffs available for those who cannot use earplugs.
- 3. Train your staff:** Educate supervisors that hearing loss is an "invisible disability" that requires specific safety adjustments.

As we look toward a more industrial

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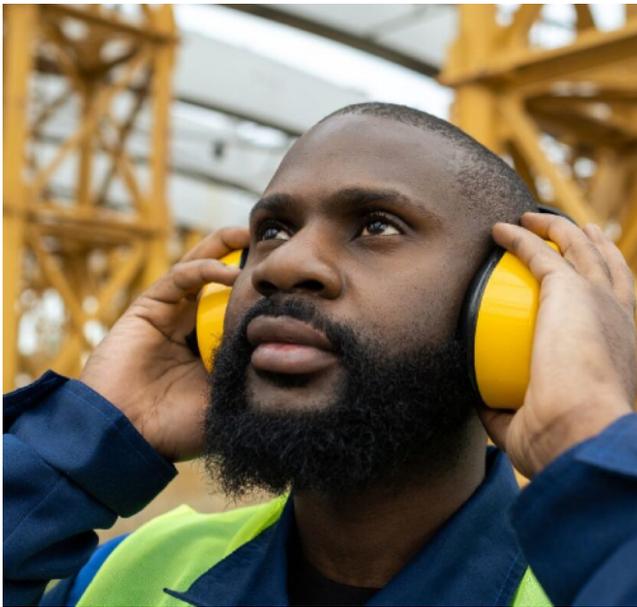
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Namibia, let us ensure that the sound of our progress doesn't cost our workers the ability to hear the voices of their grandchildren.

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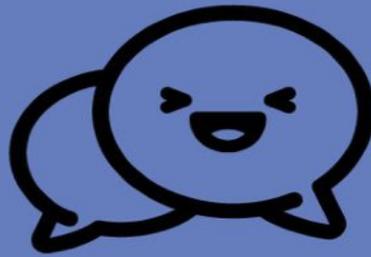
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Fun Time - *Joke of the week*



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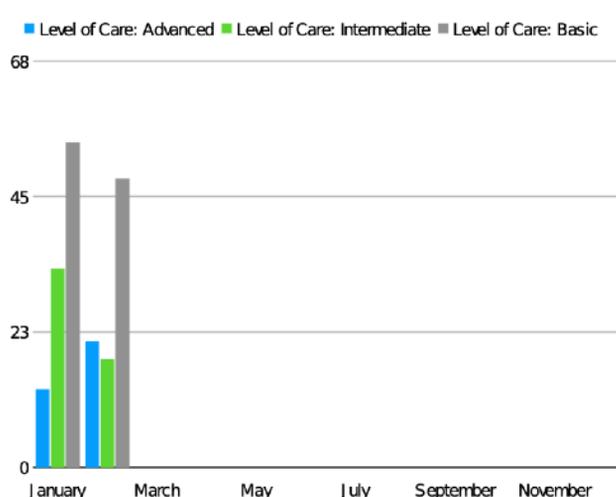
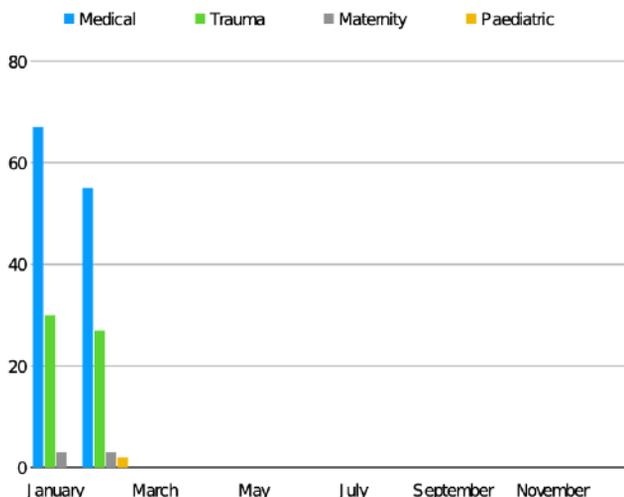
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February	55	27	3	2	21	18	48
March	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
April	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
May	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
June	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
July	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
August	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
September	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
October	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
November	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
December	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
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- **Waiting** for further question

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