

The hearing sector in France : an evaluation

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Executive Summary

The hearing sector, which deals with a sensory disability affecting millions of French people (and beyond internationally), especially the oldest, was until recently a component of the French health system less known than others. It is based, for the treatment and fitting of elderly patients with presbycusis, on the activity of 2,800 Otorhinolaryngologists (ENT), several tens of thousands of general practitioners and 4,400 audioprosthodontists (paramedics). It represents collective financing of more than one billion euros per year, mobilized mainly by complementary health insurance and, to a lesser extent, by compulsory health insurance.

The hearing sector has been impacted with rapid changes for several years, mainly due to “100% Health” (100% Santé) government reform, technological developments, competition between hearing aid distributors and declining demographics of ENTs.

It is in this context that GoF Ministers of Health and Higher Education, Research and Innovation requested, by mission letter dated March 25, 2021, the General Inspectorate of Social Affairs (IGAS) and the General Inspectorate for Education, Sport and Research (IGÉSR) to launch an evaluation mission to assess the implementation of 100% Health and changes in professional practices.

The evaluation mission excluded from its scope public health issues related to birth deafness, profound deafness, occupational deafness and the prevention, screening and care of children between 6 and 18. The mission focused in priority on the results of 100% Health, the organization of professions and prevention, screening and fitting of patients with presbycusis as well as their care pathways and, finally, the training of ENT as well as audioprosthodontists.

In its first part, the mission report shows that the 100% Health reform has had a strong quantitative impact from 2021 but that its qualitative effects are still uncertain. Even though it is an ambitious reform of hearing aids reimbursement, the 100% Health reform has been implemented gradually. And if the growth in the volume of hearing aids sales has been stronger than expected if we judge by the figures of the first half of 2021 (+70%), it came later than expected. The share of 100% Health hearing aids, with no cost to patients, known as class I (40%), also exceeded the expectations of market players.

The qualitative effects of the 100% Health reform are, for their part, difficult to assess at this stage. Although there does not seem to have been any major change in patient profiles, the organization of the hearing sector nor the role of key stakeholders, it is not possible to determine whether the compulsory follow-up is carried out correctly or not by audioprosthodontists, in particular due to the financing scheme in place. The observance and satisfaction of people with hearing aids are not known

either. The report highlights the resulting risks of drift and calls for better monitoring of promotional practices, more effective monitoring of compliance with regulations and strengthening monitoring of equipment by hearing aid professionals.

Among the priority recommendations are: implementing a simplified satisfaction questionnaire, launching controls of invoicing by hearing aid professionals, undertaking systematic and compulsory remote transmissions of follow-up services immediately after their completion and extending to class II devices (at free rates) the obligation of full third-party payments by complementary health insurers. The mission's report also recommends, subject to conditions, activating the clause for lowering the limit sale price of class I devices at the end of the first quarter of 2022 and then initiating negotiations on the characteristics of 100% Health reform from second half of 2022.

In the second part, the report shows that the reform has revealed and exacerbated previous challenges facing the hearing sector. While the data available in terms of epidemiology and real-life use are few and sometimes inconsistent, actions in terms of prevention and screening are still limited in the field of presbycusis, which is an insufficiently recognized public health issue. In this regard, the report recommends as a priority to propose anyone reaching their 55th birthday a hearing test. To overcome the difficulties linked to the demographics of ENT specialists and the risk of lengthening appointment times, the report also recommends postponing the date of entry into force of the obligation for general practitioners to have training in otology to be authorized to prescribe hearing aids until enough of them are trained and fitted.

The report also analyzes the issue of tensions in the labor market for hearing aid professionals and the interest of specifying their skills and professional rules in regulatory texts. It points to the insufficient formalization of healthcare pathways and pleads in particular for the experimentation of a protocol adapted to elderly dependent people with a mobility deficit.

The third and final part of the report calls for a rapid evolution in the training of ENTs and hearing aids professionals. Adjustments to ENTs training should primarily aim to enhance the attractiveness of the medical practice of ENTs by creating, in particular, within the so-called Diploma of Specialized Studies (DES), a course centered on audiology and functional explorations as well as a specific transversal training (FST) in audio-vestibulometry.

With regard to the training of audioprosthodontists, whose model has not changed for twenty years, the reengineering of the national government diploma is now urgent. It should go hand in hand with recognizing the bachelor's degree, developing an academic offer of specialized masters and strengthening of pooling and bridges with other paramedical training. The report also recommends the relaxation of the terms and conditions for carrying out internships and the harmonization at the national level of approval criteria for internship supervisors. In order to temper the recourse to semi-face-to-face training in Spain which, although in conformity with European law, has taken on a considerable extension, and to meet the demand for hearing aids professionals on the market, the report recommends an increase in the number of graduates in France. This requires a significant increase in the quota of places open at the entrance to existing schools, in the order of 150 to 200 places, by supporting universities wishing to open new initial training. The report recommends developing also the various continuing education systems for current employees.